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A/N: Speaking of my heroic beta-reader, a huge thank you to Gwendolyn for discussing and proof-reading the fic and for putting up with me while I'm writing! This story wouldn't exist if not for you. One day, your kindness will be repaid. Maybe even by me...

On a different note, this is an AU (obviously) about a canon Harry being Sorted differently. So assume that the first few chapters of The Philosopher's Stone stand unchanged up until the point when Harry puts on the Sorting Hat - because the Hat does not listen to Harry's demands and off to Slytherin he goes, having just fought with Malfoy and befriended Ron and not having had the time to become the paragon of all that is Gryffindor. This is the first part of a project that spans all 7 books; the plan is to have the number of chapters correspond to the year, i.e. one chapter for first year, two for second, three for third, etc.

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"You could be great, you know, it's all here in your head, and Slytherin will help you on the way to greatness..."

(The Sorting Hat, Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone)

I.

Slytherin. He was a bloody Slytherin. Head bowed, eyes fixed on an empty plate, he tried to comprehend the enormity of the Hat's decision. Hagrid had said that all wizards who go to Slytherin end up bad, hadn't he? Well, what did it mean for Harry – surely he wasn't bad already?

("Always spoil everything... ungrateful... freakish... strange... abnormal...")

He wasn't.

Angry, now, and not a little frustrated. Why did the bloody Hat have to put him in bloody Slytherin with bloody Draco bloody Malfoy and away from – all kids who seemed nice? Even the bushy-haired know-it-all didn't seem so bad now, nor the hapless boy with the toad. They were a little annoying, yes, but at least they weren't – Slytherins.

"Weasley, Ronald!"

Oh god, what would Ron think of him now? All hope that Ron would go to Slytherin too were dashed with the Hat's decisive "GRYFFINDOR!" Harry clenched his fists and tried to calm his breathing. Nothing for it. He raised his eyes.

Ron was staring at him with the expression of utter betrayal.

("I don't suppose Ravenclaw would be too bad, but imagine if they put me in Slytherin.")

Well. That answered that question. He didn't dare look at Hagrid; one disappointed gaze was all he could take in an evening.

Zabini, Blaise was Sorted into Slytherin and seated himself next to Harry. The Sorting was finally over and Dumbledore got up to speak some nonsense, and then food appeared out of nowhere on the table. Harry nearly jumped.

"It's called magic, Potter," Malfoy said acerbically. Two huge boys next to him – Crabbe and Goyle? – guffawed.

Harry fixed Malfoy with a glare and felt the weight of many looks on him – some suspicious, some malevolent, some blatantly curious. He was familiar with the way kids worked: now that the ball was set rolling, questions would start. He steeled himself and stifled the despair that was creeping up his throat. It was not the time to show weakness. Bullies would pounce on that at once, he knew.

And he hated knowing that things would be the same here as they were in his old school.

He had probably been foolish to hope for anything different.

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And yet it was different and Harry was grateful for small favours. There were rules to living in Slytherin, unspoken little rules that Harry picked up as he went along; invisible ties connecting certain members of his House; dark secrets and closets full of skeletons, but Harry knew quite a bit about secrets and he certainly was an expert on closets. The most obvious principle ruling Slytherin was power. If you had power, you were fine; if you had no power, you tried to gain it; and if you had no power and no idea how to gain it, the least you could do was mask your ignorance and hope that nobody sees through your façade.

Ignorance was weakness; knowledge was power.

There was a reason, after all, why Harry Potter started going to the Library in his second week of school.

To be honest, Harry didn't want power. He didn't want to be a bully like Malfoy or Marcus Flint, but he wanted to be safe from the Malfoys and Marcus Flints of Hogwarts, and, unlike with Dudley, there was an actual way of achieving that goal. So he kept his head down, tried to slip under everyone's radar and spent a lot of his time in the Library, where bullying was unlikely to happen anyway. He had loads to learn. He was terribly unaware of wizarding customs, wizarding ways of doing things, wizarding history and his own place in that intricate world of connections and alliances. He knew next to nothing about his parents. He knew next to nothing about Voldemort. He knew next to nothing about Hogwarts.

If he was to carve out a place for himself in the wizarding world, this had to change.

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Potions had been his least favourite class and Professor Snape his least favourite teacher ever since the first evening, when the Professor had cornered Harry and given him a very threatening speech.

("Misbehaviour – pampered prince – prancing around – expelled faster that you can say Potions – flaunting your fame – keeping an eye on you, boy.")

Harry'd been half-furious, half-terrified, so he couldn't really recall later what the Professor had said, but he'd grasped that his Head of House hated him and would enjoy punishing him for the mildest infraction.

So it was in a foul mood that Harry arrived to the Potions classroom door, but the morning was about to get only worse.

"So, Weasel, I'm surprised to see you at Hogwarts... I wouldn't have thought your family could afford to send so many of you here."

Harry had apparently arrived just in time to witness Malfoy picking on Ron. It really wasn't Ron's fault that Malfoy had been born a jerk.

"Shut up, Malfoy," he hissed quietly into Draco's ear. He'd rather snap at the boy for everyone to hear, but one of the Slytherin rules was to present a united front to other Houses at all times. "He hasn't done anything –"

"Aha, and your friend Potter is here too," Ron said suddenly. Harry flinched away from Malfoy. Did Ron think..? "You're a traitor to the Light side, you slimy Slytherin!"

And right there, staring amidst dead silence at the boy whom he would have called his friend not five minutes ago, Harry felt something inside him freeze. Ron had a harsh, unforgiving expression on his face; clearly, by getting Sorted into Slytherin, Harry had committed some cardinal sin. No friendship was possible according to Ron, not anymore; no friendship with anybody, likely, now that he was a slimy Slytherin.

("There's not a single witch or wizard who went bad who wasn't in Slytherin.")

Suddenly seeing himself from aside, Harry realised that he was standing on the Slytherin side in a crowd of Slytherins and Gryffindors. Ron thought that Harry and Malfoy were friends, because Harry was in Slytherin too, as if that would change anything. Did that change anything? Hate it or not, he was one of them now. He couldn't go back; he couldn't undo the Sorting, un-convince the Hat.

("You could be great, you know...")

It wasn't his fault. Worse, it wasn't as if these kids were monsters. Malfoy was a twit, Nott was annoying, Crabbe and Goyle were scary and Zabini was distant, but they weren't – evil. Harry hadn't made friends in Slytherin, no, but he'd thought he was friends with a Gryffindor – and how quickly did that change? How was Ron better than Draco right now?

It hurt to think, so Harry opened his mouth to talk instead.

"Oh, I'm so sorry to have Sorted Slytherin. I've missed out on all the ways to become as narrow-minded and thoughtless as you are."

There. He'd stood up for Slytherin. The world was slowly tilting off its axis.

He felt the cautious, assessing gazes of his classmates. With a sinking feeling, he realised that Malfoy approved. Ron's eyes, on the other hand, widened in betrayal, and Harry felt a sliver of anger penetrate the hurt. What, it was okay for Ron to insult Harry, but not the other way around? He didn't care for a friendship like that, thanks.

"Yes, Weasley, why don't you go and crawl back to that hole you came out of..." Draco interjected.

Harry didn't know which one of them he wanted to punch more.

"Shut up, you stupid – "

“Ten points from Gryffindor, Mr Weasley,” Professor Snape said, appearing soundlessly out of the classroom.

Harry ignored Ron’s sputtering and Malfoy’s smirk and marched into the classroom ahead of everybody else, still steaming with anger. During the Potions Master’s introductory speech, Harry did not listen to the Professor’s words, but tried to calm down instead. By the end of class, his and Bulstrode’s boil-curing potion actually resembled the desired result. Obviously, nothing could compare to Malfoy’s concoction, not according to Professor Snape anyway, but Harry felt satisfied with his efforts.

And during the Potions class he did, for the first time in the last week, feel extremely grateful not to have become a Gryffindor. The way his Head of House tore into poor toad boy, decimated the bossy know-it-all and humiliated Ron left Harry rather glad he could escape the carnage with the rest of the Slytherins.

After all, it didn’t matter that the Professor hated him; Slytherins were united in public.

Thankfully.

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“Excuse me, is it okay if I sit here?”

Harry raised his head from One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi to see the bushy-haired Gryffindor from before. She looked quite anxious, balancing three heavy tomes, her rucksack, quills and parchment in her arms.

“Sure,” he nodded.

He wasn’t convinced it was a bright move; he was a Slytherin and she was a Gryffindor and he would get a lot of grief for being seen with her. The same thoughts seemed to be flying through her head, as she threw a nervous glance at the green crest on his robes, but

her entire being screamed determination. Looking around, Harry realized that there was nowhere else she could possibly sit.

They worked in silence for an hour and then Harry got up and left.

The next day he was back and so was she.

The day after Harry learnt that her name was Hermione Granger. She'd told him that back when they met on the train, but he'd forgotten since. She, of course, had read all about him in Modern Magical History and The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts and Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century. Harry wasn't sure he liked the girl, but she was really intelligent and eager to help and he could benefit from that.

Explaining it to his fellow Slytherins, of course, took some effort.

"Potter, what do you think you are doing, getting all friendly with that Granger creature?" Nott asked, lip curled in disgust.

Harry glanced up from his homework to find that Malfoy, his goons and Parkinson were hovering by as well. He sighed.

"She's smart. I'm using it to my advantage and being very sneaky and Slytherin that way."

For a moment everyone stared at him and he almost hoped his explanation would work.

"Potter, she's a Mudblood," Malfoy said slowly, as if addressing a two-year-old.

"I know," Harry answered with the same air of exaggerated patience. "Strangely, that doesn't make her any less clever and therefore useful."

"Are you that desperate for friends, Potter?" Parkinson sneered.

Harry rolled his eyes, looking a lot braver than he felt. He'd known that socializing with Gryffindors was a bad idea. The thing with Longbottom was proof enough.

Having established that Longbottom was atrocious at Potions by the third week of class, Professor Snape decided to punish Harry for existing by making him Longbottom's permanent partner. Harry had been doing okay in Potions up until that point; he and Millicent Bulstrode coexisted in the state of cool civility which suited Harry just fine. Longbottom, however, seemed to explode everything he touched. A potion that was meant to be, for all intents and purposes, non-toxic, managed to go berserk and eat through a desk under Longbottom's care. In other words, Harry stood no chance.

He thought it was unfair, but of course he didn't say anything.

What the situation did mean, however, was that Harry had to study extra hard at Potions in order to anticipate Neville's mistakes and prevent explosions. His research into wizarding history took a backseat to the urgent need to improve his knowledge of Potions. He wanted to get at least a pass for this class, even if he would never get a good grade with such a partner. Cue Granger, whose help he needed to stay afloat in Potions.

And all of it would have been just peachy, but he didn't particularly want to antagonize his House too much. They did not, of course, get to dictate whom he befriended, but they did know where he slept and Harry had still not perfected the charms to booby-trap his bed.

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"Um, Potter?" Longbottom asked uncertainly.

Harry sighed and refrained from rolling his eyes only through a supreme effort of will.

"Yes?"

Honestly, he was nearing the end of his patience. Today's potion was – well, he wasn't sure what to call it, but certainly not what it was



meant to be. The disgusting goo they'd concocted was still sitting in their cauldron and it didn't look like it would ever be scraped out again. Snape had delighted in stopping by and berating them loudly in front of the entire class. Longbottom had borne the brunt of the snide questioning ("Do you have eyes, Longbottom? Yes? In that case, why did you not bother to read the instructions?") and the ensuing lecture ("Class, please note the depths of incompetence to which a student might sink"). Yet, Harry had not missed the way the charcoal-black eyes bore into him. He had not been foolish enough to raise his head and challenge his Head of House, but it had grated on his nerves incredibly to just stand there and listen to the foul diatribe without complaint. He hated feeling helpless.

And really, Snape knew this was not his fault – Longbottom had messed up the potion, as always, and Harry needed eight eyes and three hands at the very least to keep up with the bloody Gryffindor. And ever since Granger had been attacked by the Troll on Halloween she'd become very skittish and withdrew into books even more, so not only had he missed a few weeks of her coaching while she was recuperating – now it was rare that she tutored him at all. And Harry did have other classes apart from Potions that needed his attention too, so sometimes he thought the easiest option would be just to throttle Longbottom and eliminate the problem altogether.

So now, he was really not in the mood for Longbottom's usual end-of-class apology.

The other boy, in the meanwhile, seemed to be gathering the famed Gryffindor courage to speak.

"Look, Longbottom, just don't bother," Harry hissed. "Your 'sorry' doesn't raise my grade."

Longbottom went pale.

"Uh, I'm sorry, but –" Harry's expression must have been thunderous, for he went on hastily: "I tried! I tried and tried! But I really don't get it, I just can't do it when P-p-professor Sn-nape is looking at me and I just forget everything and –"

Harry closed his bag forcefully and threw it over his shoulder. Seeing that he was about to leave, Longbottom hurried after him.

“Can I make it up to you? I mean, you know I’m sorry but – I can – I can do Herbology! I can help you in Herbology if... if you would like that.”

Harry stopped in the corridor to look at the other boy incredulously.

“You’re good at Herbology? Then why do you mess up Potions so bad?”

“I don’t know!” Longbottom wailed in a distressed fashion. Harry wrinkled his nose.

“Okay. How about... you ask Granger for help?”

“Hermione?” Longbottom asked, confused.

“Yes.” This time Harry did roll his eyes. “You know, lots of hair, smart, in your House? I’ve been working with her, but it’s hard for us to meet up, so it would make more sense for you to go straight to her for help. Just... ask her.”

Longbottom looked worried.

“But why would she help me?”

Because she’s a loner, Harry wanted to say. Because I don’t know about you, but I haven’t seen her talk in a friendly way to anybody in your House. In fact, her best friends appear to be those dusty tomes she is so fond of carrying around. She’ll love having someone to talk to. It’d make sense for the two of you to team up because you seem to be an outsider too, toad-boy.

Just like me, he added wryly.

“She will,” he uttered with confidence, instead.

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He was one of the only three Slytherins staying for the Christmas holidays: with him were a third year Adrian Pucey and a rather stressed sixth year girl.

("Solstice, Potter, it's the winter solstice we're celebrating, did you think we cared for Santa Bloody Claus? You're such a Mudblood sometimes...")

He enjoyed waking up with nobody else in the dormitory – it was a really nice change from looking over his shoulder all of the time, now that he could compare the two. Back at the Dursleys he always needed to be on guard as well, so this Christmas vacation was a rare treat. Hagrid had invited him to visit during the holidays and Harry did, unsure of his reception now that he had been a Slytherin for half a year already, but Hagrid was cheerful as ever.

"Good ter see yeh, Harry, come on in," he said, beaming.

He gave Harry tea and rock-hard scones and asked him about life and everything was going well – except Harry couldn't shake the feeling that Hagrid was holding back a little. It was an odd visit; Harry hadn't had a bad time, exactly, but he couldn't help feeling that things would have been different between himself and the amiable giant had Harry been a Gryffindor.

("Good man, yer dad – a Gryffindor through an' through – not tha'... yeh know... Slytherin's not... they wouldn' have minded, yeh parents...")

Well. At least Hagrid didn't hate him.

On Christmas morning Harry stretched and yawned leisurely and then sat up in his four-poster. Then, however, he was in for a huge surprise: there were actual gifts on his bed. Who would send him presents? He'd never received any; Dudley got lots and Harry got none, that was the way things worked in the Dursley household. To think that someone would think highly enough of Harry to get him presents – Harry felt himself smiling in pure joy.

His presents were amazing, too. Longbottom gave him Chocolate Frogs and Hagrid got him a flute, which delighted Harry even though he had no intention to ever play it, and Bulstrode gave him a singing Christmas card and even Granger sent him a card and there was a mysterious package on his bed, too.

This Christmas holiday was the most wonderful thing ever.

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Harry scowled at himself. That had been close: twin footfalls of the Potions Master and Filch the caretaker walked past his hiding place not a minute after he'd sequestered himself in an unfamiliar room. This is what happened when he gave in to stupid Gryffindorish impulses and threw caution to the wind! How dumb had he been to go exploring the castle with the Invisibility Cloak when he knew Professor Snape would take delight in catching him? And if he absolutely had to go, he should have at least learnt Silencing Charms first so that people wouldn't hear him walk around.

And anyway, where was he? Harry turned around, not taking the Cloak off. Apparently, he'd ended up in an unused classroom: desks and chairs were lined up by the walls, like in other similar classrooms Harry had come across in his search of a quiet place to practice spells without Slytherins breathing down his neck. However, one peculiarity attracted his attention immediately: there was a huge ornate mirror standing in the middle of the room.

Curious, Harry slowly approached and soon he was standing in front of the reflective surface, but oddly enough he could see nothing there. Harry blinked and then realised that he was still wearing the Cloak. With a furtive glance to all sides, Harry took the Cloak off and stuffed it in his pocket. Then he looked up.

And froze.

Reflected next to him were at least ten other people.

Harry took a step backward; his reflection did, too. He closed his eyes; when he opened them, the crowd was still there. He whirled

around, searching frantically for a sign that there were people in the room with him, when he'd been so sure there was nobody – invisible, maybe, were they invisible? He turned back to the mirror and watched his reflection carefully as he extended a hand until it should have come into contact with a woman standing next to him; but he felt only air. There was nobody there. And yet – was he seeing things? Who were these people, even?

He stepped closer and examined them. The woman he'd tried to touch had auburn hair, kind smile and her eyes... they were bright green. Exactly like Harry's. Frowning, now, Harry shifted his gaze to look at the man standing on his other side. He had messy black hair, bespectacled hazel eyes and – and god, he looked precisely like Harry expected himself to once he grew up. He had the same nose, the same cheekbones, the same chin, and his hair stood up at the back of his head the exact same way and – what was this? What was – Harry, wide-eyed and breathless, gaped at the rest of the crowd and spotted similar atrocious hair, knobby knees, eyes of comparable green... He swallowed, painfully, and tried to take in everybody's faces at once, all of them smiling at him encouragingly, all of them accepting... And, most importantly, the man and woman right next to him. They were his mother and father, he understood it now – they could not be anybody else, they were his parents –

“Mom?” The redhead nodded, tears in her eyes. Harry felt his own prickling too. “Dad?”

The man just smiled sadly and put a hand on Harry's shoulder. Reflective Harry's shoulder, because Harry didn't feel anything, but he could almost convince himself that he did. He stood, transfixed, in front of them, hungrily memorizing their faces. He hadn't known he looked quite that much as his dad – and that his mom had been quite so beautiful. They were a dream come true. In this cold, abandoned classroom Harry had found something that proved, once and for all, that he didn't just spring into existence out of nowhere. He had parents – or had had parents, once, and they were wonderful. And he could finally see them and spend some time with them and with his entire family.

He wasn't leaving anytime soon.

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He'd had to depart from the room in order to catch some sleep and turn up at meals, so that nobody would wonder where he'd gone, but he spent as much time with the Mirror as was possible. Yet, he must not have been cunning enough, for Dumbledore found him on the third evening since the initial discovery of the Mirror.

"So – back again, Harry?"

Harry flinched away from the reflection and turned around only to see the Headmaster sitting on one of the unused desks.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said automatically, trying to calculate just how much trouble he was in.

"Not to worry, my boy. Wizards older and wiser than you have been lured by the delights of the Mirror of Erised; many have gone insane before it, forgetting to eat and sleep in their determination to catch a glimpse of what it shows them..."

Harry listened politely. He would love to ask just what it showed them, but wasn't sure that such boldness would be allowed. Dumbledore peered at him and Harry got a distinct impression that he'd just been x-rayed.

"The happiest man on earth standing before this mirror would see himself and only himself reflected in it, just as he is. Can you guess what it does, Harry?"

Harry blinked. The fact that the happiest man on earth would see just himself and Harry saw a whole bunch of people showed, if nothing else, that Harry was not as happy, but he didn't need the Mirror to tell him that. Well. The Headmaster expected an answer.

"Um, I see my family..." he said, hoping that it would distract Dumbledore from the riddle.

“Yes, and somebody else would see themselves receiving the Order of Merlin, First Class,” the Headmaster nodded congenially.

Harry frowned.

“It shows us something we cannot have, but really want?”

Dumbledore smiled.

“Yes and no. The Mirror of Erised shows us nothing more and nothing less than the deepest and most desperate desire of our hearts, Harry. That desire does not necessarily have to be unattainable, although in your case, it unfortunately is.”

Harry swallowed painfully. It had been wonderful to see his parents. To almost believe he had them again. To know that he’d just been gazing at his most desperate desire – it somehow didn’t diminish the allure of the Mirror or make the desire any less desperate.

“The Mirror gives us neither knowledge, nor truth. Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad by its promises. It will be moved to a new location tomorrow, Harry, and I must ask you not to go looking for it again.”

There was a sterner look to Dumbledore’s eyes, now, and Harry found himself nodding.

“I understand, sir,” he said quietly.

“Very good. Now, off you trot, Harry; it’s almost curfew. I shall take no points for finding the Mirror; and you will be prepared if you are ever faced with it again. Good night, my boy.”

“Good night, sir,” Harry replied and, with one heart-wrenching glance towards the traitorous Mirror, left the room.

He had no idea where, according to Dumbledore, he might encounter the Mirror again.

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Harry tried to get back into the swing of things after that. He and Adrian Pucey teamed up against the Weasley twins in a snowball fight; the Weasleys won, psychic as they were, but Harry got a few good laughs and a bonding session with Pucey out of it. The guy was apparently crazy about Quidditch; he was a Chaser of the Slytherin team and chattered on delightedly about the win against Gryffindor the previous term. The Gryffindor team had a really appalling Seeker, which in Harry's opinion had helped the Slytherins, but it was hard not to be drawn in to a feeling of at least some patriotism for the Slytherin team when Pucey waxed poetic about it. He bemoaned the fact that Terrence Higgs, the Slytherin Seeker, was graduating next year. During his Flying Lessons Harry discovered that he did love to fly. Maybe...

"I might try out, then," Harry said, thinking aloud. "If there is a position opening..."

Pucey squinted at him, a calculating look appearing in his eyes.

"Well, you're a Potter; your father was supposed to be really good, so you might as well try. Just make sure to tell Flint it was I who recruited you, if you get in."

Harry nodded distractedly. His dad had been good at Quidditch! What else didn't he know?

His thoughts kept straying back to the Mirror of Erised, whatever he'd tried to do in the next few days, and he found himself actually looking forward to classes starting again. At least then he'd have homework to complete, people to dodge and classes to attend – and wouldn't have the time to brood over the unfairness of only ever seeing his parents in an insanity-inducing Mirror.

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It was a good thing indeed that, growing up with the Dursleys, Harry became fast and agile. Otherwise, he would probably have gotten on the wrong side of Crabbe's or Goyle's fists more than once by now, the way Malfoy kept setting them on Harry. Harry snorted quietly,



slipping into an unused classroom. There. Crabbe and Goyle would not be intelligent enough to consider that Harry might have hidden somewhere instead of continuing to run in straight lines. He was relatively safe now; perhaps he could practice the Body-Bind Curse, it sounded pretty useful...

"A-ha! Now, who's come to pay us a visit?"

Whipping his head around and berating himself for letting his attention wander, Harry turned around, wand at the ready, only to see redheaded twins grin him in their crazy identical way. He relaxed, but only marginally; although he and these particular Weasleys were on non-belligerent terms, he never quite knew what to expect of them.

"Oh," he said, for lack of anything better. "I didn't realize there was anyone here. I'll just go then –"

"Go?" One of the twins – he thought it was Fred – raised his eyebrows. "But you only just got here!"

"And what Slytherin sneakiness brings you to this humble retreat?" the other one, probably George, added.

Their brown eyes were smiling mischievously; despite their vaguely threatening tone, and the fact that there were two of them and one of them, Harry wasn't overly worried. They'd never hurt him before – for some reason, his Sorting did not offend them the way it did Ron. They just shrugged it off and kept on cordial terms with him – not that their interactions often exceeded simply waving at each other in the corridors. He'd asked them, once, why they hadn't turned on him if he was in Ron's black books. Both of them had looked at him as if he was the batty one and said that they would never lay into someone who managed to get not one, but two of their brothers riled up until steam was coming out of their ears. Apparently, Percy was having near-apoplectic fits each time Ron got into trouble because of his feud with Harry. Since driving Percy bonkers was one of the twins' goals in life, they had no problem with Harry fighting with their brother.

Privately, Harry thought that it would change immediately should he actually harm Ron; the Weasleys' family loyalty was legendary, after all.

("Blood-traitors, the lot of them. Father says they are disgrace to all Purebloods. Poor as dirt and about as powerful – disgusting, really...")

Harry shook his head. The whole family might be dressed in shabby hand-me-downs, but so had Harry been for most of his life. And Ron might be a pillock, and Percy a bore, but the twins were okay. Harry was sure they'd get along fine had they been in the same House – and not necessarily Gryffindor; he thought they had quite the sneaky Slytherin streak themselves.

"Just exploring the castle," he answered in the meanwhile. "I'm sure you know what I mean."

The terrible twins beamed at him.

"There's a good lad!"

"So what were you doing here?" he asked.

"Oh, same as you." Fred waved a careless hand.

"Not plotting any pranks, then," Harry said, slyly.

"Oh no, no pranks, we wouldn't ever," George protested.

"Honestly, Harry, who do you take us for?" Fred was all offended innocence.

Harry observed them critically.

"Right," he said. "I don't want to know. But in case you were having a prankster's block, I should tell you that Malfoy is majorly scared of mice."

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"I heard Hagrid's hut caught on fire yesterday," Neville confided, pruning the soil around their plant with sure hands.

Harry blinked at the non sequitur.

"How come?" he asked, nonplussed. He hadn't been to see Hagrid in quite a while, caught up in his studies as he was, but maybe it was time to pay another visit to the friendly groundskeeper.

"Oh, I don't know." Neville shrugged. "Someone was saying it was a dragon, but how likely is that? No, Harry, careful with that thorn – you'll sneeze non-stop if it grazes you."

Harry carefully extracted his hand from the vines.

"That's... interesting," he muttered, in the end. He recalled Hagrid telling him that he would dearly want a dragon, but what was the likelihood of Hagrid actually getting one?

Hopefully, zero.

"That oaf might just be stupid enough to try and raise a dragon in that wooden hovel of his," Malfoy sneered. He was working at the next table and it was obviously too much to expect that he'd keep his mouth shut.

Harry sighed.

"Yes, thank you Malfoy. Your opinion is priceless and has been duly noted," he said blandly.

Malfoy glared at him, but didn't say anything since Harry hadn't actually been rude. Neville smiled timidly. He was rather scared of Draco, but probably felt that Harry provided some sort of protection from the blond Slytherin. A ridiculous notion, really; Harry and Malfoy might be at each other's throats a lot of the time, but Harry was very aware that Malfoy had power on his side and Harry didn't. He was probably suicidal to keep up his feud with Malfoy, but they've lived this way for almost a year and, although Harry walked on eggshells

around his House, he had yet to be beaten into a pulp. A few impromptu duels here and there, sure, but those were good Defence practice, as far as he was concerned.

He and Neville had become tentative friends in the months since their confrontation in Potions. Neville had both taken Harry's advice about speaking to Granger and insisted that they partner for Herbology. Harry had been sceptical at first, but it turned out that Neville really did have a flair for the subject, so Harry felt this evened things out a little. Neville improved Harry's grade in Herbology and Harry kept them from crashing and burning in Potions. With them being on better terms now, part of the additional tension was gone and Harry could take his efforts from explosion prevention to actual potion brewing.

He got a straight O in Herbology and a sort-of friend out of the deal, so he was not complaining about additional Potions work.

The Slytherins – especially Malfoy, Nott and Parkinson – had tried to give him grief about the budding friendship with Neville, but thankfully the Longbottoms were an old Pureblood family, so Harry got out of that one relatively easily. And if the Gryffindors, particularly Ron Weasley, were pestering Neville about befriending a slimy Slytherin, Neville never said anything on the matter.

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“Potter?”

“Yeah?”

He squinted at Blaise Zabini. Blaise Zabini squinted at him.

“I’ll help your revise for History of Magic if you give me a hand with Potions.”

Harry did his best not to stare. Staring was very uncool and therefore unSlytherin.

“You’re asking me for help with Potions? Why?”

Zabini's expression remained stony.

"Anyone who can survive a year of Longbottom and get passable grades is going to breeze through the exam."

When Zabini put it that way, Harry thought he had a point. After all, he had devoted a crazy amount of time to studying Potions this year. As to the offer... Harry cocked his head to the side. Zabini was one of the quiet ones. He picked no conflicts and chose no sides; like Bulstrode, he had not interfered in Harry's conflicts with Malfoy. Greengrass and Davis stayed out of the way too, but they stuck together and seemed to try and avoid being noticed, period. Harry had the impression that, if push came to shove, they might bandwagon with Malfoy. Zabini and Bulstrode, on the other hand, were relatively independent and had never actively tried to harm Harry.

"Alright," Harry said airily. "Potions in exchange for History of Magic. Deal."

Who knew; he might do okay in more exams than he'd thought. Especially since Nott had heard about the arrangement and wanted to benefit from Harry's Potions knowledge, too. Harry would have told him where he could stick his ideas, but Nott was good at Transfiguration and Harry was not, so he shrugged and played along. After all, he didn't have to like Nott in order to work with him.

Malfoy said that Harry was a fraud at Potions. Harry said he was wounded. Draco told him not to be sarcastic to his betters. Harry promised to not be sarcastic to the next better he came across. Malfoy threw the first hex. Harry retaliated. Nott and Zabini just leaned back and watched the sparks fly.

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When they walked into the Great Hall for the Leaving Feast, the place was decked out in Slytherin colours: green and silver banners hung from the ceiling and the Slytherin emblem was displayed behind the High Table. Harry seated himself between Nott and Zabini and eagerly waited for the feast to start.

“Another year gone!” Dumbledore announced cheerfully, standing up from his centre seat at the High Table. “And I must trouble you with an old man's wheezing waffle before we sink our teeth into our delicious feast.”

Harry looked at the teachers, wondering...

“Where is Quirrell?” he asked Nott in a whisper.

“Do I look like I know?” Nott sneered, but there was no malice in it.

“I heard he’s had an accident of some sort,” Malfoy informed them.

Harry raised his eyebrows.

“The rumour has it he’s snuffed it,” Draco continued.

Theodore didn’t look impressed.

“What, tripped over his own feet and fell to death?”

Malfoy shrugged, somehow managing to imply that he knew the details, but wasn’t going to share them. The ploy only worked on Grabbe, Goyle and Parkinson; the rest knew Malfoy too well to fall for his charade.

“...Ravenclaw have four hundred and twenty-six and Slytherin, four hundred and seventy-two,” Harry heard Dumbledore say and joined in cheering for Slytherin with the rest of the House. “The points standings mean that Slytherin wins the House Cup for the seventh year running. Congratulations, Slytherin!”

A loud cheer rose up from the Slytherin table, while the Gryffindors groaned, and the other two Houses clapped politely. Professor Snape looked as smug as his sour disposition allowed, while Dumbledore was absolutely inscrutable.

Sitting with the Slytherins and revelling in the shared victory, Harry felt, for the first time, that maybe it wasn't such a bad thing to belong here, too.

-End of year one-

## II.

Harry was having an awful birthday all around. First, he'd had to withstand Dudley's taunting for receiving no presents, then he worked in the garden without getting any food, and then he had to pretend not to exist because the Masons were coming over.

"Remember, boy – one sound from upstairs and you'll regret you'd ever been born," Vernon Dursley snarled threateningly as Harry trudged up to his room.

"Yes, Uncle Vernon," he said dully.

It was so like his Uncle to come up with these little inspirational statements that made you feel all warm and fuzzy on your special day. With a sigh, Harry slipped into his room and was fully prepared to collapse on the bed after working hard all afternoon, but, to his astonishment, there was already someone sitting there.

Huge tennis-ball eyes, floppy ears, pillowcase for clothing.

Harry had become familiar enough with the wizarding world over the last year to know that this was a house-elf, but what was a house-elf doing in his bedroom? The Dursleys certainly had none, with the exception of Harry whom they used for the same purpose.

The elf bounced from the bed and lowered his back in a deep bow.

"Harry Potter! Dobby is so honoured to meet Harry Potter sir – " the creature would have gone on, but Harry shushed it forcefully.

"Be quiet," he snapped, frowning. "What are you doing here?"

The house-elf's ears drooped a little at the admonishment, but the enthusiasm in its eyes did not diminish.

"Dobby has come to warn Harry Potter sir! Harry Potter must not go back to Hogwarts!"

Harry stared at the house-elf. Did he just say?..



“Who sent you?” he asked, frowning.

House-elves acted on the bidding of their masters; Dobby must be here on an errand.

The question plunged Dobby into unexpected frenzy.

“No-no-nobody sent Dobby! Dobby disobeyed his family! Dobby is a bad elf!” With that, the creature jumped a foot in the air, grabbed Harry’s bedside lamp and started hitting itself on the head.

Harry thought he heard the conversation quieten downstairs. He remembered his Uncle’s threats well; suddenly afraid, he lunged at the elf and took his weapon away.

“Stop right now!” he hissed furiously. “If you make that much noise again, I will find out the name of your master and tell him that you’d come to see me.”

Dobby’s eyes widened and the elf clamped a bony hand over his mouth. The next time he spoke, it was in a stage whisper that was still not as quiet as Harry would have liked, but better than the incessant squealing from before.

“Harry Potter must not come back to Hogwarts,” the creature repeated. “There is a plot – a plot to make terrible things happen in the School of Witchcraft and Wizardry this year. Harry Potter will be in great danger. Harry Potter is too important for us to – ”

“I see,” Harry interrupted. He figured that this was a ploy by one of this Slytherin classmates. They were certainly rich enough to own house-elves and eager enough to keep him from returning to Hogwarts. “So you’ve come here to tell me that I should not go back to Hogwarts. Is that all?”

The elf nodded with so much enthusiasm that his ears flopped madly against his head.

“Yes! Harry Potter must promise Dobby that he will not go back to Hogwarts!”

“And then you will leave,” Harry ascertained.

“Yes, then Dobby will leave, Dobby will know Harry Potter is safe!”

Harry scrutinized the creature for a moment.

“Okay,” he said.

Dobby blinked. Harry raised his eyebrows.

“Okay, I will not go back to Hogwarts. You can leave now.”

Dobby continued looking amazed, as if he had expected the mission to be much more difficult. He eyed Harry with a certain amount of suspicion.

“Harry Potter promises he will not go back to Hogwarts?”

“Yes, I promise,” Harry confirmed, crossing fingers in his pocket.

The elf shuffled from foot to foot and finally gave a tentative smile.

“Thank you, Harry Potter sir. Harry Potter will see that it is for the best. Dobby will go now. And... Dobby is sorry, but here is Harry Potter’s post.”

The elf produced a small pack of envelopes and parcels from somewhere inside his ragged pillowcase. Harry felt his breath catch. Is that why nobody had written to him all summer? Was this creature the reason why Harry had to wonder sometimes whether the entire wizarding world had been a dream?

Harry must have looked murderous, because the elf took a fearful step back.

“D-Dobby thought that if Harry Potter had no mail he would think his friends abandoned him...” he started, wide-eyed, but quickly realised

that Harry did not need to hear this right now. “Um, here are Harry Potter’s letters, sir, and Dobby will be going!”

With a ringing pop, the wretched creature was gone from Harry’s bedroom.

Harry stood glued to the spot, clenching his fists in impotent anger. Whose commands was the elf following? Which one of Harry’s classmates was dumb enough to think that Harry would fall for their scheme? Grave danger, indeed! Whoever sent Dobby clearly had no idea about Harry’s home life, because as things stood right now, he’d rather face grave danger at Hogwarts than spend a whole year at Privet Drive.

Idiots. Bloody – wankers.

He marched towards the bed and took the top letter with shaking fingers. He’d thought he hadn’t made friends good enough to write him over the summer. Certainly none of the Slytherins were close with him. Harry had half-hoped that Neville would not forget him, but he was not overly surprised when Neville stayed silent, too. Now it seemed that people had not forgotten his birthday. There were letters and parcels on his bed, right here...

Harry took a deep breath and dug in. Neville had written once during the summer, apparently, but received no reply from Harry and decided not to bother him again. However, the timid boy did send Harry a box of Chocolate Frogs for his birthday. Zabini, Bulstrode and Granger sent birthday cards, and Hagrid managed to owl him a whole photo album. Harry was smiling widely by the time he was done opening his cards and presents.

He was so happy he almost forgot to resent the elf. Almost.

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Harry was staring at the barrier before Platform 9¾ in disbelief. He’d just tried to get through, like last year – and the bloody wall stayed solid! Or turned solid, whichever, point was – Harry couldn’t pass. And the Hogwarts Express was about to leave, because of course his

relatives didn't give a damn that he arrived at the station so late. And – Harry glanced at the station clock desperately. It was one minute to eleven. He tried again, more discreetly, aware that a boy with a trunk, a broom and a hooting owl in a cage attracted unwanted attention. The wall wouldn't budge. The barrier stayed closed. Harry watched in astonishment as the clock hands turned to signify that it was officially eleven o'clock now and the train was gone. Harry glared at the barrier some more, but it was of no help. He was not getting onto the platform; he needed to think of a new plan.

Harry retreated towards a bench, parked the trolley next to it and sat down. What on earth was he going to do? He had to get to Hogwarts; there was no way he was going back to the Dursleys. How could the barrier have done this? Harry frowned. He knew that someone wanted to prevent him from returning to school this year; was it the insane elf meddling again, with or without permission from his masters? Furious, Harry snapped his gaze up, looking around the station as if in the hopes of catching the culprit, but then he was hit by the ridiculousness of his actions.

Yes, it was probably the blasted house-elf who'd done this, but Harry could do nothing about it right now. Right now, he needed to focus on reaching Hogwarts. He had no idea where the school was and he could definitely not get there on his own. Therefore, he needed help. Harry wrinkled his nose. He didn't like needing help. In order to ask for assistance, he had to contact someone; the only way to contact someone was by owl. The wizards he knew were at the school. There, the solution wasn't too difficult: he just needed to send an owl to someone at Hogwarts, and hopefully someone would come and pick him up.

Harry dug up some parchment, but didn't dare write with a quill in plain sight, so a ballpoint pen it was.

"Dear Professor Dumbledore..."

Harry felt it was the safest writing to the Headmaster. He had spoken to the old man once and he hadn't seemed too bad; and Harry didn't properly know any other teachers except Professor Snape. And if

anybody believed Harry would ever write to Snape, they had to think again.

Harry looked over his letter. Hmph. It would do. Looking around surreptitiously, just in case anyone was watching, Harry unlatched the lock on Hedwig's cage and tied the letter to her leg.

"There you go, girl. Could you take it to Headmaster Dumbledore at Hogwarts? Maybe it'll make up all that time you had to spend locked up in the summer?"

Hedwig hooted reproachfully, as if denying the claim that anything so meagre as a flight to Hogwarts could possibly compensate for her miserable summer. Harry shrugged, smiled wryly and let her go. A few people noticed that there was an owl flying above their heads, and a couple of young girls squealed, but thankfully nobody realized that it was Harry's doing. He tried to hide behind his luggage trolley and seem inconspicuous. After all, it was likely that he would be here for a while.

Very quickly, he got bored. He could not practice magic, he could not read since his books were magical and he even lacked the comfort of talking to Hedwig. And it had all been going so swimmingly, too, Harry reflected gloomily. He had got rid of the elf and enjoyed his presents. His school list for next year had thankfully been delivered when he was alone in his room and he started planning for his trip to Diagon Alley at once. It had taken a lot of sneakiness, diplomatic skill and subtle threats to convince his relatives to take him to London and drop him off at the Leaky Cauldron. The Dursleys had been dead set against going, of course.

("We'd promised to stamp this unnatural nonsense out of you! I'm not helping a – freak – to become even more – freakish!")

However, since Harry had managed to behave himself during the Masons' visit and Uncle Vernon got his very important deal signed, the Dursleys were in a better mood than normal in the ensuing weeks. Aunt Petunia had taken to leafing through property magazines in search of that perfect house in Majorca, Dudley was happy that he would get a new VCR and Uncle Vernon was bursting with pride at

his own ingenuity. In such a setting, the family found itself more prepared to tolerate Harry and his abnormality, especially since Harry took extra care to be polite and not rise to any of Dudley's baits. The final argument to convince the Dursleys to take him to the Leaky Cauldron and then to King's Cross was that, surely, they wanted to get Harry out of their hair for another school year.

A matronly lady stopped by after a while to inquire why he was sitting at the station all alone. Harry had managed to convince her that he was just waiting for someone, and dearly hoped that someone would actually turn up soon. He'd be shipped to an orphanage at this rate, otherwise.

"Potter!"

Harry jumped. There was no mistaking that voice or those malevolent tones.

"Professor Snape," Harry acknowledged, resigned, and stood up.

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Even though the school year got off to an rocky start, what with Professor Snape holding a grudge for the detour to Kings Cross and Professor Lockhart making Harry believe that it was possible to die of embarrassment, Harry's prestige in Slytherin rose slightly ever since he'd become the new Seeker. People knew that both he and the Malfoy scion had tried out for the position; the amount of raw talent he had to possess in order to beat Draco and his father's influence commanded respect. Malfoy had not, of course, gone down without a fight: he was now one of Slytherin's Chasers. Interestingly, Malfoy's father happened to donate a generous amount of money for buying the Slytherin team a set of Nimbus 2001 brooms. Everyone knew that the donation had something to do with Flint's decision to kick another Chaser off the team in Malfoy's favour, but nobody was saying anything. After all, it had been only prudent on Flint's part.

Harry wasn't sure what he felt about flying on a broom Mr. Malfoy had purchased, but he had just shrugged and let it go. Some things were just not worth fighting over.

Others, however, were, and Harry wasted no time in telling one Colin Creevey that, should he try to accost him for autographs again, he'd tell the Slytherin Quidditch Team that Colin was trying to sabotage him. He'd like to see Colin walk away alive and breathing from that. The mousy Gryffindor stared, wide-eyed, gulped audibly and sped off, shouting that he was sorry all the way. He almost made Harry feel bad about being so blunt, but the idea of walking around the school with an adoring shadow for everyone to laugh at was more than Harry could bear. Malfoy would not have let Harry live it down, especially not since Harry beat him at the Seeker tryouts.

Gilderoy Lockhart, in the meanwhile, was a problem on a whole different level.

"Harry, Harry, Harry," the Professor would say and throw an arm about Harry's shoulders, as if they were the best of chums. "Do not start giving out signed photos too early in your career: it might make you appear too eager for spotlight."

Or:

"When you get to the level of nationwide popularity I'm at, Harry, you'll learn that fame is a burden you have to bear with dignity."

Harry felt he bore his current burden with great dignity, but he was reaching the end of his tether. He had researched the Notice-Me-Not charm and started applying it on himself in Lockhart's immediate vicinity; he wasn't sure how legal that was, but hopefully nobody would find out. He just knew that there was no way he was getting called upon to do another impersonation of the Wagga Wagga Werewolf in class. Not if he could help it.

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"Lockhart has no clue what he's talking about," Nott uttered with confidence. "He's even worse than Quirrell."

"And that's saying something," Harry agreed.

They were about to exit the Great Hall after the Halloween Feast. It had been rather fantastic: huge pumpkins and scarily real decorations and – it just made Harry happy he was a wizard, all over again.

“This school is going to the dogs,” Malfoy scoffed. “Dumbledore keeps hiring idiots.”

“Urgh,” Crabbe grunted in what Harry assumed was agreement.

Parkinson giggled as if Malfoy had said something witty. Harry kept wisely quiet. He, too, felt that the Defence Professors were seriously lacking, but he wouldn’t go as far as to badmouth Dumbledore who had only been nice to him.

“Mind you, Potter, Lockhart does bring out the dramatic actor in you,” Malfoy sneered. “Pity that he’s stopped calling on you to act out scenes from his books. I think the role of the Banshee suited you most.”

Crabbe and Goyle bellowed with laughter.

Ignore Malfoy. He had to ignore Malfoy.

“The Yeti was good too,” Nott added. “Must be the beastly Muggle nature in you shining through, Potter.”

“You know full well my mother was a witch, Nott – ” Harry started, throwing caution to the winds, but suddenly the first year Slytherins ran into the backs of other students who’d come to an abrupt halt.

“What’s happening?” Parkinson demanded in a shrill voice. Harry winced; that had been uncomfortably close to his ear.

Through a gap between two people in front of him, Harry could discern the second floor corridor, flooded for some reason. There was a message on one of the walls, written in something that resembled blood:

THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED.



## ENEMIES OF THE HEIR, BEWARE.

Harry blinked, re-read the message again and didn't like it upon second reading any more than on the first. Then he spotted something hanging from a torch bracket under the crimson words. He couldn't make out what it was, but was soon jolted out of concentration anyway, because Malfoy said loudly from next to Harry:

"Enemies of the Heir, beware! You'll be next, Mudbloods!"

What followed was complete pandemonium. Argus Filch burst onto the scene and accused the student body as a whole of murdering his precious cat; everyone started talking and shouting; amidst the chaos, Professor Dumbledore arrived to take control of the situation. He'd examined the stiff cat, conferred with the teachers and sent the students on their way.

Malfoy, Harry noted with disgust, seemed to have a bounce in his step as they were walking towards the Slytherin dungeons.

"Have you seen it?" he was asking gleefully. "Have you seen it? The Chamber of Secrets has been opened!"

"Yes, Draco, we've seen it," Nott said, rolling his eyes in exasperation.

"But have you seen it? It said, right there, that the Chamber has been opened! The Slytherin's Heir has come to the school!"

"Anytime you feel like pointing out the obvious, Malfoy, please feel free," Harry said pleasantly.

Malfoy had gone red in the face and glared at Harry.

"Bet you're scared, aren't you, Potter? With your blood tainted as it is?"

"I'm terrified, Malfoy," Harry deadpanned. "Trembling already. Oh woe is me."

Even Nott couldn't restrain a snicker. Zabini and Bulstrode were smirking. Daphne Greengrass and Tracey Davis tried to melt into the crowd and pretend they were giggling about something else.

Malfoy fumed and stomped all the way to the Slytherin Common Room in silence.

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A week later, Harry was eating breakfast before his first ever Quidditch match. He tried to maintain a cool façade, but he had to admit he was really nervous. The atmosphere in the school for the past week had not been conducive to a calm frame of mind. Rumours were flying about; speculation about the Heir's identity ran rampant, especially in Slytherin. Malfoy liked to pretend that he knew more than he was letting on, but he didn't impress anyone except the usual band of sycophants. One useful thing Harry found out from him was that the Chamber had been opened fifty years ago and a Muggleborn had died then, but that did not at all help to shed light on the legend he read about in *Hogwarts, A History*. If the Chamber had been opened fifty years ago, it followed that the Heir had been at school then and was possibly alive today. Yet, this yielded nothing in the way of what the mysterious beast in the Chamber was.

Harry shook his head and tried to concentrate on the match, but in some ways, it was better not to think about the match, because if he failed to catch the Snitch after Flint had appointed him Seeker over Malfoy... Well, he better die trying. His chances of surviving the day were nil anyway.

"Stop looking so green, Potter, you're putting me off food," Millicent Bulstrode said, wrinkling her nose. "Your match will be fine."

"Unless you fall from your broom and die," Blaise Zabini interjected with a pleasant smile. "Which might be somewhat unfortunate."

"Good to know you care, Zabini," Harry muttered, staring at his toast in disgust.

“I’d attend your funeral,” Blaise said in all seriousness. “And bring, you know, flowers.”

“Thanks. So much.”

Millicent rolled her eyes.

“Don’t pay attention to Zabini, Potter. This sort of a morbid streak comes to you naturally if your mother’s husbands keep dying like flies around your house,” she said, smirking at Blaise.

He actually went red in the face.

“What are you suggesting, Bulstrode?”

“Oh, nothing,” she said airily. “Why, have I touched a nerve?”

Harry’s pre-game jitters were forgotten as he watched the exchange in fascination. It was always great to observe power plays, especially if they did not involve you.

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Harry had been given a sleeping potion so that he would be unconscious for most of the time while his bones were mending. Apparently, having a Bludger ram into his shoulder at full speed had been a bad idea and Madam Pomfrey would prefer he shatter some more easily fixed part of his body the next time. Harry had to agree, except he was glad it wasn’t worse. He’d never thought he’d come to feel grateful towards the Quidditch Captain – he was, after all, very tall, muscular and intimidating, in a trollish sort of way, never minced his words and didn’t seem to like Harry much – but Flint had saved him from Lockhart’s meddling. It seemed that the Slytherin Quidditch Team was the first and only love of Flint’s life, which meant that Harry fell under his protection too. Sort of.

(“I’m taking my Seeker to the Hospital Wing... No one tells me what to do with my players! Now, don’t you dare fucking faint on me, Potter, you hear?”)

Well.

Harry rubbed his eyes, wondering what woke him up. It was still quite dark, after all; maybe the sleeping potion had stopped working? He squinted at his surroundings.

“Dobby!”

The house-elf’s eyes were huge with fright. Harry sat up abruptly, wincing at the pain in his shoulder.

“Oh, Dobby did not want to wake Harry Potter sir! Dobby is so sorry!”

“Dobby, just – ”

“Why has Harry Potter sir come back to Hogwarts?” the elf cried in sudden agitation. “Dobby tried to warn him but Harry Potter didn’t listen! Dobby closed the barrier so that Harry Potter would miss the train, but – ”

“So that was you, after all.” Harry clenched his fists.

“Yes, but Harry Potter must not be angry! Dobby only tried for the best, for Harry Potter must not remain at Hogwarts! Dobby thought that his Bludger would – ”

“Dobby, if you value your life, don’t tell me that it was you who’d charmed that Bludger.”

“Dobby is used to death threats, sir! He gets them every day from his family.”

And that was very sad, but didn’t excuse the elf’s abominable behaviour towards Harry. He felt suddenly tired.

“Look, Dobby. I get it that you want to help,” unless it’s your master trying to kill me, “but you’re really going about it the wrong way. I could have died today. So far, I have been in more danger because of you than because of whatever terrible things are meant to be happening – ”

“Oh, but they are happening, Harry Potter sir! The Chamber of Secrets has been opened once more – ”

“And you knew all along that it would be?” Harry asked incredulously. “Why warn me? Why not Dumbledore?”

“Harry Potter doesn’t understand, he – ”

And then Dobby went quiet. Footsteps were nearing the Hospital Wing. With one last sad look at Harry, the elf disappeared.

And in came the Headmaster and Professor McGonagall, carrying the Petrified form of Colin Creevey.

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“Three – two – one – go!” Lockhart commanded.

“Petrificus Totalus!” Harry fired, hoping it would strike Malfoy.

However, the other boy managed to jump out of the way just as he was sending his own hex. In the meanwhile, the results of Malfoy’s Serpensortia materialised: a long black snake lay on the ground, turned towards Harry and poised to strike.

Shit. Harry thought furiously, trying to come up with something...

“Don’t move, Potter,” Snape said airily, probably enjoying the scene. “I’ll get rid of it.”

“Allow me!” Lockhart butted in and, before anyone could stop him, he brandished his wand in an aimless fashion.

The snake, instead of disappearing whence it came, lifted up in the air, did a somersault and dropped back on the ground, now even angrier than it had been before. Harry watched as it slithered towards a student Harry vaguely knew by sight and raised its fangs...

“Stop!” he commanded, in the vain hope that it would work. He fully expected the snake to disregard him, but to his amazement it backed off from its target and turned towards Harry. “Leave the students alone.”

The snake, miraculously, continued to obey. It folded down on the floor and projected what to Harry seemed an image of utmost docility. Harry raised his eyes, suddenly aware of the silence around him, and realised that everyone was staring. Harry’s heart plummeted. What had he done now? Automatically, he glanced at Malfoy – his face was white – and then at his Head of House. Professor Snape was also looking at him with an expression Harry hadn’t ever seen aimed at him before: intense and calculating. Harry did his best to appear calm.

Professor Snape banished the snake with a wave of his wand and said something to Malfoy. The other boy nodded and headed towards Harry; Harry had a feeling he really wouldn’t like what was coming. As Malfoy approached, Harry realised that other second year Slytherins closed ranks around him. Blaise and Millicent appeared unusually stern.

“Come on,” Malfoy muttered. “Let’s go to the dorms.”

And he looked at Harry differently too, as if something had changed about him greatly between now and the beginning of their duel.

“What – ” he tried to ask, but found himself herded by Crabbe and Goyle towards the exit.

“Later, Potter,” Nott said tersely. “Merlin, you just had to pick this time to reveal this, didn’t you?”

“Reveal what?”

“Nott, wait till the dorms,” Malfoy ordered with a frown.

Harry didn’t think he’d ever seen Malfoy frown seriously before.

They talked no more until they arrived at the dungeons. The boys propelled Harry towards their dormitory and closed the door. They all

sat down on different beds, while Harry remained standing, unsure of what was going on.

“Potter,” Malfoy said, and it seemed like he was trying and failing to regain his usual equilibrium, “why on earth did you pick tonight to announce that you’re a Parselmouth?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Harry answered with perfect honesty. He was a what?

“Why, Potter? Why in front of the entire school? And why didn’t you tell us first?”

Harry drew his eyebrows. Notably, they all appeared to know what Malfoy was on about, even Blaise Zabini. The dark haired boy was watching him carefully.

“Malfoy. Let’s go over what happened. You conjured a snake. I told it to retreat...”

“Precisely! When were you planning to tell us that you are a Parselmouth?”

“That you can talk to snakes, like Salazar Slytherin,” Nott added slyly.

Malfoy flashed him a glare.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Theo. Potter’s not the Heir of Slytherin. There’s no way.”

“Isn’t there?” Nott asked lightly. “He could talk to snakes the last time I checked. You know the whole school will think he’s the Heir.”

“The whole school is stupid then, have you seen Potter creeping about opening hidden chambers?”

Harry’s head was spinning. He leaned against a bedpost and stared unseeingly at the two arguing boys. He had known he could talk to snakes since a long time ago, but he never thought it was something bad. He tried to think of his readings – surely, at some point he would

have come across something that indicated that speaking to snakes was a special ability! However, all he could remember was a passage in Hogwarts, A History about Salazar Slytherin's great affinity for snakes. It sounded like he bred them, not talked to them!

His thoughts were dashing in all kinds of directions. Is this why he was Sorted into Slytherin, because he had its founder's special talent? And how deep of a hole had he dug for himself – Nott was right, the whole school would think he was the Heir, he fit the bill so well – a Slytherin and a Parselmouth to boot, what other proof would people need?.. And was he actually the Heir of Slytherin? Was he related to the Hogwarts founder? Could he be opening the Chamber and Petrifying people without knowing it?

"Potter!"

Harry shook his head slightly, filing his thoughts away for later consideration.

"Yes?" he asked cautiously.

"Were you ever planning to tell us you were a Parselmouth?" Nott inquired.

"No," Harry said truthfully.

"Then why," Malfoy hissed, "did you go and pull that stunt tonight?"

"I didn't mean for it to happen," Harry replied. He was saying too much truth, probably, but he still felt too shell-shocked to come up with lies. "The snake was about to strike. I had to stop it. I didn't want a corpse on my conscience."

There, he'd almost managed to make it sound as if he'd actually known he was a Parselmouth. Damn it! He should have spent more time on wizarding culture than on Potions last year and more time on research than on Quidditch this year and maybe he would not have been in this situation right now.



The boys were gazing at him calculatingly. Harry didn't know what they were looking for.

"Are you the Heir of Slytherin?" Vincent Crabbe asked.

"Crabbe, don't be dumb, he's not," Malfoy snapped.

"Why are you so sure?" Harry asked in curiosity.

After all, he wasn't sure; how could Malfoy be?

The blond rolled his eyes.

"The Potters didn't have a drop of Slytherin blood in them."

"But he's a Parselmouth," Gregory Goyle pointed out.

This was probably the first instance when Harry saw Malfoy's two minions disagree with their leader.

"Yes," Malfoy acknowledged reluctantly. "He is. That doesn't prove anything."

"The ability to speak to snakes was hereditary in the Slytherin line," Blaise Zabini said, as if reciting from somewhere. "You don't just... learn it."

"But look at him!" Malfoy exploded. "Does Potter look like someone who goes around setting beasts on Mudbloods? He's a half-blood himself!"

"Okay," Blaise allowed. "Maybe he's not the Heir of Slytherin, but an heir..."

"He is standing right here," Harry said firmly.

The other boys jumped at the interruption and stared at him again.

"This isn't going to be easy," Nott remarked, eyeing him with resignation. "The entire school is going to think you're the Heir, even

if you're not. Which you still have to prove, by the way, because appearances can be deceiving and I don't think you're friends with a single Mudblood."

"They're going to blame it all on you, Potter," Malfoy said with gusto. "They'll say you Petrified the stupid cat and attacked that Mudblood. It won't matter that you're the Boy-Who-Lived, now."

"It'll probably make things worse," Nott observed clinically. "They'll think you're superpowerful or something. Which, if you are, please note I'm not disputing."

"Nott, don't be stupid," Malfoy hissed. "Potter isn't the Heir."

"But he might be an heir and Nott's not alienating him," Zabini said shrewdly.

Harry was beginning to find this fascinating. A few Parseltongue phrases seemed to transform power relations in his dorm. He wondered about the rest of Slytherin. Yes, the school probably hated him, but at least in his House it would be hypocritical to despise him for the ability to talk to snakes. Did Neville fear him now? Were the Potters really related to Salazar Slytherin? And would the rule of united Slytherin once again work in his favour?

Disclaimer: Alas, Harry Potter does not belong to me. I'm just playing with JK Rowling's characters and making no money from it whatsoever.

A/N: Eternal gratitude to my beta Gwendolyn. She is a saint for having put up with my repeated pleas to "please have another look at OWG-2, I swear it's the last time..." Also, special thanks to Worldmaker, whose thoughtful comments prevented me from making a canon error! Apart from that, a blanket warning for swearing – the characters are going to occasionally utter all kinds of nasty words in every chapter from now on.

As always, reviews and constructive criticism are very welcome.

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The worst part of being widely believed to be the Heir of Slytherin was that, suddenly, Harry was the most interesting person in Hogwarts. People would crane their necks to see him, give him frightened glances, gossip about him, follow his every move with suspicious eyes... After the Petrified body of Justin Finch-Fletchley and the frozen form of the Gryffindor ghost were found in an upstairs corridor, the school went from nervous to panicked in a flash – and the Gryffindors felt it was a mark of bravery to try and trip Harry up or hit him with a spell in the corridors. There were times when Harry seriously contemplated hiding under the Invisibility Cloak until the horrid gossip abated. Even the Slytherins were treading softly around him, and they knew where Harry was most of the time, seeing as they'd taken up a habit of shadowing him to and from classes.

"It's not like you had to be there personally to do it," Blaise explained helpfully, dark eyes glinting in amusement. "You could just tell your pet monster to go for Finch-Fletchley, right?"

Harry supposed it was possible.

("Rip... tear... kill... I smell blood!")

He shuddered. Maybe it was possible. Maybe he was hearing some sort of a monster move through the walls of the Hogwarts castle, deadly and invisible to all...

...Mind you, it was mightily unlikely that a deadly monster of any sort would be living inside walls and calling out to Harry in particular. It was, however, highly plausible that Peeves was playing a joke or that some ghost was whining about their life – or lack thereof. Harry could definitely imagine the Bloody Baron, for example, confessing to the desire to kill and pillage as he swooped through the castle in all his menacing glory.

Still, that mysterious voice gave him the creeps.

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Harry wouldn't admit it to himself, but he was actually quite nervous about Neville's reaction. School-wide panic annoyed more than hurt him most of the time; they were idiots to think that a second year would be capable of finding a chamber Dumbledore himself failed to locate. It was infuriating to be on the receiving end of baleful glares for something he had not done, but he was used to being an outcast. In Slytherin, the belief in his culpability actually improved his social standing. Neville, however, was a friend – tentative, but a friend nonetheless, and it would hurt if he rejected Harry like the rest of the school had. The majority of the students didn't know Harry; Neville did, a little bit. Harry wasn't sure he'd stand it if Neville pulled a Ron Weasley on him.

However, Neville went to their usual table during the next Herbology lesson.

"Hullo, Harry," he said. There was a little awkwardness in his manner, but overall he seemed the same as normal.

"Hi, Neville." Harry bit his lip.

He wasn't really sure what to say. Should he try to reassure Neville that he wasn't dangerous? Or should he pretend that nothing had

changed and that a roomful of Gryffindors wasn't glaring at him like he was the foulest creature of the underworld?

Neville gave him a shy smile.

"Don't worry," he said softly. "I don't think you are the Heir of Slytherin."

"You don't?" Harry repeated hopefully. "Why not?"

"Well..." Neville shrugged and absently tickled a stem in front of him. Harry could have sworn he heard the plant purr. "I don't think you want to kill all Muggle-borns, your mother was one. Besides, Hermione's been trying to do research into the Slytherin line and the Potters aren't turning up anywhere yet..."

He shifted from foot to foot and looked up at Harry, blinking.

"I'm... You just don't seem the type."

Harry felt himself smile – a genuine, relieved smile – for the first time in days.

"Thanks, Neville," he said, heart immeasurably lighter. "So, to re-pot this shrub, do we tweak its leaves, sing La Marseillaise to it or what?"

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Harry was quite glad when Christmas holidays commenced. Christmas meant that the majority of the whispering, gossiping mass of students was going home, leaving Harry in relative peace. Of course, Malfoy just had to remain behind to spoil Harry's fun, but Harry figured he would get a lot more time for himself than during the last week of class. Time to – say, research the Potter family line, something he should have done ages ago.

Not that staying in dorms with Malfoy and his pet gorillas would be the best experience of his life.

"Potty?"

“We’re not in kindergarten, Malfoy.”

“I just like calling you names.”

“I’d noticed.”

Pause.

“Do wizards even have kindergartens?”

“Well, the Malfoys have never attended them. None of the good families do.”

“No kindergartens for inbred kiddie wizards?”

“Funny, Potter. Your father was one of us, you know.”

That silenced Harry. Indeed, his research into the family line showed that the Potters were a very old Pureblood family, intermarried with the Longbottoms and the Weasleys and the Parkinsons and the Selwyns and the Malfoys and – everybody, really, so if not for Harry’s Muggle-born mother, Harry would have been just as inbred as Malfoy. What’s worse, the blond git turned out to be wrong: Harry had traced the genealogical line to someone called Ignotus Peverell – and that Peverell’s father was, apparently, a descendant of the Slytherin line. Fair enough, the connection was distant and very tenuous, but the fact was that Harry did have Slytherin blood in him, even if it was only a drop. Harry’s heart had clenched when he’d gotten to the blasted Peverells – lived in the bloody fourteenth century and still managed to mess up his life – but then, rather quickly, he had realized that, really, lots of other people were descended from that family. Most of the Purebloods, in fact – or else so they all liked to claim. Harry had rather brightened at that, because either pretty much everyone qualified as the Heir of Slytherin to the same extent as Harry, or else everyone simply wanted to make themselves appear important by citing the Peverells among their ancestors – and the Potter family might have been no different. Maybe they had invented the connection in order to not be outdone by their Pureblood rivals.

For the Potters, shockingly, seemed to have cared about class issues for most of their history. Indeed, they could not possibly have stayed Pureblood well into the twentieth century by accident: the constant interbreeding with other Pureblood families must have been deliberate. They had also possessed all the qualities Harry despised in Malfoy – belief in their own prominence, pride in family history, and wealth taken completely for granted. Still, they tended to produce light wizards – very few Potters had joined any Dark Lords or succumbed to the lure of power. So, overall, they seemed to be a good sort.

(“The ability to speak to snakes was hereditary in the Slytherin line... You don’t just... learn it.”)

That is, a good sort unless you counted that whole Peverell business, because, surely, Harry must have inherited his Parseltongue abilities from somewhere.

“And let’s not forget your darling godfather from the House of Black, rotting in Azkaban as we speak...”

“... with your aunt, Malfoy.”

“... Shut up.”

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Harry could honestly say he had not anticipated the attack. One minute, he was walking down an empty hallway; the next, someone suddenly pounced upon him. A fist hit him squarely on the face, knocking off his glasses, another caught him in the solar plexus, and he was vividly reminded of Dudley and angry that he’d been caught off guard and wanted to get his wand out. Someone was already hitting him with a spell, though, and boils broke out all over his face and hands and he stifled a yell of pain, but tried to fight back – he always did, didn’t he? Hands were grabbing him, though, holding his arms, and he really didn’t know where it would have led –

(“Been fighting again, have you, boy? No, I will not give you aspirin, you hooligan, you don’t deserve any for such ghastly behaviour!”)

- well, he didn't know how far they would have gone, but suddenly, a voice cut through the haze of pain:

"What's going on here? What – you – Smith! Stebbins! Stop it, are you insane?"

The blows ceased falling, but the hands holding him in place did not relax their grip. Harry squinted at the source of the voice myopically, feeling rather disoriented.

"Come off it, Diggory, you know what he's done to Justin."

"Just teaching the His Slytherin Highness a life lesson, yeah? Don't mess with Hufflepuffs, you get yours."

"You'll get yours, Stebbins, if you don't unhand him right now."

The fury in that voice was unmistakeable; Stebbins must have recognized it, for he let Harry's arms go after all. Harry stepped away hastily and scowled in the boy's general direction. He wished he had his glasses on so that he would be able to memorize that face – and Smith's, too.

"Diggory, don't be such an – "

"You're not even a Prefect - "

"Clear off, both of you, and I'll be reporting this to Professor Sprout. I can't take points, but you won't like what she'll do to you."

"Fuck you, Diggory."

With that highly intellectual parting shot, the two boys retreated, leaving Harry with the unknown Diggory. He sounded decent enough, but Harry didn't like anyone's company at all when he was beaten up, half-blind, and sporting furuncles in very visible places.

"Er – "



“Finite Incantatem. Merlin’s grizzly beard, the nerve of – here are your glasses, Potter.”

Gratefully, Harry put them on and looked at his hands: the boils were gone now. The non-magically inflicted injuries, of course, remained. Harry steeled himself and raised his eyes: the Diggory boy turned out to be tall and good-looking, and he was gazing at Harry with a great deal of concern. His robes indicated that he was a Hufflepuff, just like Harry’s assailants.

“I’m Cedric,” he said, smiling apologetically. “Cedric Diggory, I’m sorry for those idiots. They really took the Heir nonsense to heart, and when Justin...”

Harry attempted a casual shrug, but barely concealed a wince of pain as he tried to move.

“Not your fault. Thanks for the help.”

Diggory would never know how much it cost Harry to say that.

“Come on, let’s get you to the Hospital Wing.”

Professional help at the cost of the whole school finding out? No, thanks. He’d healed from worse on his own before.

“No! I mean,” he went on, because Diggory was looking at him incredulously, “I’m fine, really.”

“No, you’re not,” Diggory said firmly, with the same kind of authority that had made Harry’s attackers stop.

“Look, Diggory, I can deal with it – ”

“I’m taking you to the Hospital Wing.”

Harry was losing patience along with strength.

“Why d’you even bother, how d’you know I’m not the Heir, maybe they were right?”

Diggory didn't budge.

"If you were the Heir Petrifying students, I doubt you'd let a pair of kids beat you up."

"I'm not weak!"

He regretted the words the second they were out of his mouth.

There was a pause. Then –

"I never said you were. Look, Madam Pomfrey's really good about these things, okay? She doesn't ask questions and doesn't tell. And you can't possibly think you'll hide this from your Housemates? 'Cause that shiner on your face is pretty distinctive, let me tell you."

Harry scowled.

"Come on." Diggory nudged him carefully on the shoulder. "We'll take the shortcut."

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In the event, Diggory was wrong in that Harry didn't manage to keep the attack from the Slytherins even despite having been healed, but admittedly he was able to face the music in full health, at least. Harry rather thought he would have really liked Cedric had the older boy not seen him at his weakest moment.

Regardless, Harry had been seen leaving the Infirmary. His insistence that he had just wandered in there randomly did not convince anyone.

"I'll bury them," Marcus Flint said, a feral smile lighting up his dull face. "Trying to do my Seeker in, the little bastards –"

"No," Harry objected. "Everyone hates Slytherin enough as it is, it's no good to start attacking people –"

“And it’s okay to attack a Slytherin, then?” Millicent asked, her considerable size making her quite intimidating as she advanced at Harry. “Is that what you’re saying?”

“Well, no, but – ”

“No buts, Harry.” Blaise smirked and got up to be level with Harry, removing Millie’s cat from his lap. “Let me introduce you to a fine Slytherin concept of revenge...”

The one thing that the students of Hogwarts learned in the following week was that it was best not to mess with Harry Potter – or at least wait until he got off the Slytherin Quidditch Team to do it. Harry did, however, convince Flint to leave Cedric Diggory alone, since the bloke had only been nice. Notably, the Weasley twins had joined in the fun and pranked a few particularly loud proponents of Harry-as-Heir and therefore Harry-to-be-exterminated theory. Cormac McLaggen, for instance, recited the Ode to Oldbert the Odious in Gobbledegook the entire Tuesday.

Professor McGonagall had not been impressed.

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Neville and Harry sat under a tree near the lake; Neville was staring moodily at the ground.

“I just hate it, you know?” he said, smoothing his hand over grass. “I can’t do anything to help Hermione at all. She’s just lying there, in the Hospital Wing, Petrified, and I know she’d figured something out before she ran to the Library and got attacked by that – whatever it is – and I feel that if I understood what she was doing I’d be able to help her.”

A bird sang somewhere up in the tree, not realizing the gravity of the situation.

“It’s stupid,” Neville pronounced with finality.

“No,” Harry protested. He didn’t really know what to say, though, because he’d never comforted anyone before.

“I shouldn’t have let her go to the Library alone,” Neville said darkly.

“You couldn’t have known. We’ve all let our guard down, there haven’t been any attacks for a while...”

“Yeah.” Neville sounded frustrated.

“Tell me more, though,” Harry prompted, hoping to distract him. “About her research.”

Neville shrugged.

“Not much to tell,” he muttered. “She was looking into the Slytherin line – I was helping her, too, and we got as far as the Gaunt family.” He wrinkled his nose. “The last members were supposedly insane and by now they’re dead anyway.” Neville hugged his knees. “All their names began with an M, it’ll be in Her-Hermione’s notes.” He swallowed painfully.

“Maybe the son or the daughter had children?” Harry suggested, feeling awkward.

“Maybe.”

There was silence. Harry unconsciously mirrored Neville’s pose.

“Everyone thinks it’s Hagrid,” he said in a hushed voice.

It was something he really didn’t like contemplating, even less than Granger’s Petrification.

“What do you think?” For the first time, Neville showed some interest in the conversation. Harry was rapidly losing his.

“I don’t know,” he said gloomily. “I don’t think it’s him. I mean, they made Dumbledore leave – what good will that do? I don’t think they took people really responsible...”

“Just wanted to be seen doing something.” Neville nodded. “That sounds like the Ministry, alright.”

The Giant Squid moved, disturbing the stillness of the lake’s waters and sending ripples across the surface. Harry watched them with detached fascination.

Neville slammed his fist onto the ground.

“I wish there was something I could do.”

Harry thought of Hagrid’s kind smile and of the Dementors of Azkaban and felt helpless anger bubbling up within him, once again.

“So do I, Neville. So do I.”

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“Harry Potter?”

“Yes?”

Harry turned warily, and heard Neville grunt in surprise next to him, but he only registered young girl bright hair red eyes before the world went dark.

He had absolutely no clue where he was when he awoke. He was lying on cold stone floor in a huge place that had a high ceiling and green torches giving off light from their brackets on the walls. Sitting up, Harry noticed with fear that his wand seemed to be gone; also, there was something on the floor a little distance away. Harry climbed to his feet, looking around cautiously, and approached a little nearer; he was startled to realize that he was looking at the prone form of the same ginger-haired girl who’d accosted him in the corridor. There was a book next to her. This was all very bizarre and confusing, but Harry didn’t get a chance to think about it, because in the next moment, he heard a voice from behind him and whirled around.

“So you are awake at last.”

There stood a translucent being: a handsome boy of about sixteen, with jet-black hair, a twisted smile and a Hogwarts crest on his robes. In his hands, he was twirling a wand Harry recognized as his at the first glance.

Harry tried to keep calm. He was sure there wasn't any explanation to this that he would like, but there had to be a way out.

"Who are you?"

"How odd that I should know so much about you, and you so little about me."

The boy's voice was level, but there was an undertone of mockery to it. Harry frowned and kept silent, so the boy spoke again:

"My name is Tom Riddle, Harry. Let me welcome you to the Chamber of Secrets."

Harry's heart skipped a beat. He was in the Chamber of Secrets? Did that mean that the mythical Slytherin monster was lurking in this general vicinity too?

Well, shit.

"How do you know about me?" he asked, trying to keep outwardly calm.

"Oh, little Ginny Weasley told me all she could." Tom raised an eyebrow. "She concocted a tale worthy of Romeo and Juliet about herself and you, did you know? She's been in love with you since before she could walk, but then you got Sorted into Slytherin, which was most ungallant. Still, she cast the two of you as lovers who are meant to be, separated by cruel fate and the disdain of their families – tragic, indeed."

Harry was stunned. He'd had absolutely no idea – the twins' sister? Ron's sister?

“But the puerile babble of a love-sick girl was not what interested me, of course,” the boy continued with a predatory smile. “You are rather fascinating, aren’t you?”

A red gleam appeared in Tom Riddle’s eyes; he was staring at Harry intently, as if trying to solve an intricate puzzle.

Harry kept quiet and looked around surreptitiously. He could see ornate double doors in the distance and presumed them to be the exit, but it was really quite a way away. Harry would need to turn his back to Riddle in order to get there – and he really didn’t think it was a good idea.

“Are you a ghost?” he asked, stalling for time. He didn’t know what he would use the time for, but he’d cross that bridge when he came to it.

“No. I am a memory,” Tom said with a casual shrug. “A memory, preserved in a diary for fifty years. The foolish Weasley girl had found me somehow and poured her soul out to me... she didn’t realise, of course, that the more she confided in me, the stronger I got. Towards the end, though, even she started suspecting that maybe something was not right – that maybe it was she who was opening the Chamber of Secrets all along...”

The boy sneered, his face twisted into a mask of cruelty. Harry was shaking – whether out of fear or fury, he was not sure.

“That’s just sick, you – what’s she ever done to you? How could – ”

Tom Riddle waved a hand dismissively.

“It was her own fault for writing in my diary.”

“So you are the Heir of Slytherin?” Harry demanded, barely coherent from anger.

Tom made a small bow, smirking.

“Indeed, I am. However, this is not what I have brought you here to discuss. For a while now, I had much less interest in ridding this school of Mudbloods than I had in you...”

Harry opened his mouth to retort, but Tom Riddle continued talking, his eyes acquiring a crimson gleam again.

“As an infant, you defeated the greatest wizard of all times, Lord Voldemort,” Tom pronounced, narrowing his eyes and coming a step closer to Harry. Harry made himself stay in place. “How did you do it, Harry Potter?” Another step. “How can a helpless child vanquish a fully grown wizard with unimaginable power?”

Harry’s anger receded, replaced by fear, and that cleared his head a little. There was something extremely eerie in Tom Riddle’s focused gaze, in his interest in Harry and in the lengths he’d gone to ask this question.

It seemed logical to stall, in that case. If Tom wanted an answer, presumably he needed Harry alive.

“Why do you want to know?” Harry asked. “Wasn’t Voldemort after your time?”

“Voldemort is my past, my present, and my future.”

With that pronouncement, Tom spelled Tom Marvolo Riddle in fiery letters in the air and then rearranged them into I Am Lord Voldemort.

Harry’s mouth fell open in amazement.

“Voldemort’s – Voldemort’s name was Tom? Tom Riddle? Just as – simple and common as that?”

Clearly, it was the wrong thing to say: the semi-opaque form of Tom Riddle nearly quivered in rage.

“How dare you laugh!” he bellowed.

“But Riddle isn’t a Pureblood name,” Harry pointed out.



Apparently, he had a talent for getting on Voldemort's nerves.

"I am the rightful Heir of Salazar Slytherin! My blood has remained pure for generations, until my darling Pureblood mother ran off with a good-for-nothing Muggle!"

Harry had a flash of inspiration.

"Was your mother's family name Gaunt?"

Young Voldemort's eyes narrowed.

"How did you know?"

Harry reflected morbidly that, should he miraculously get out of here alive, Neville would be pleased to hear that the enigma of the Heir's ancestry had been solved.

"My, Harry Potter, you are full of surprises," Tom Riddle was saying in the meantime. "It seems you had taken some interest in me after all. In that case, you must have noticed certain similarities between us."

"Excuse me?" Harry gritted his teeth. So far, he was quite proud of his composure, but he felt himself starting to crack around the edges.

"Well, we are both orphans. Both halfbloods. Both raised by Muggles, far from the world where we belonged. Both Sorted into Slytherin. You and I must be the only Parselmouths to have attended Hogwarts in recent memory. We even look something alike."

("It is curious, Mr. Potter, that you should be destined for this wand, when its brother gave you that scar.")

Harry flinched; he couldn't help it.

"I'm not like you at all," he said out loud, raising his chin high.

"Oh?"

"I'm not going to grow up a raging psychopath."

"I am the most powerful wizard who's ever lived!"

"No, you're not!"

Tom Riddle sneered.

"Do enlighten me, Potter, whom you consider to be stronger than Lord Voldemort."

"Dumbledore!" Harry fired off without thinking. "Dumbledore's tons stronger than you – he's the only wizard you were always afraid of!"

"Lies! Dumbledore's been driven out of the castle by the mere memory of me!"

"At least he's not transparent! And he doesn't need to use little girls to open creepy Chambers for them! And he hadn't tried to murder babies and end up being defeated by them instead!"

Riddle was pointing Harry's wand at Harry now. He seemed absolutely livid.

"Yes, Potter," he hissed, "you still hadn't explained to me your miraculous escape eleven years into your past and forty into my future..."

An unearthly, beautiful song interrupted his speech. Harry had never heard anything like it before, but it made his heart feel inexplicably lighter and his thoughts calmer. Tom Riddle, on the other hand, appeared to be displeased. Then, all of a sudden, a burst of flame came from out of nowhere, and a red bird with bright plumage flashed into existence. In its talons, it was holding – to Harry's shock – the Sorting Hat. The bird turned out to be the source of the otherworldly song; it ceased singing as it landed on Harry's shoulder.

Harry blinked in surprise. Voldemort sneered.

“So this is what Dumbledore sends his valiant defender. A phoenix bird and a tattered hat. Pathetic. I would almost pity you, Potter.”

Harry was inclined to pity himself, actually, not that he was going to show it. He was suddenly more preoccupied with the fact that Tom Riddle appeared to be more solid now than he had been at the beginning of their conversation. Glancing down at Ginny Weasley, Harry was troubled to notice that she was getting, conversely, more see-through as time went by. Clearly, Tom was somehow leeching Ginny’s life energy.

(“The foolish Weasley girl... poured her soul out to me... the more she confided in me, the stronger I got...”)

This needed to end – as quickly as possible. Stalling for time was getting him nowhere. Harry had to stop Tom Riddle somehow, but what could he do, without a wand and armed only with a hat and a phoenix? Because he was sure phoenixes were wonderful, but combat creatures they were not.

“So, Harry Potter, tell me. How did you, as a mere infant, defeat Lord Voldemort at the zenith of his power?”

Harry – snapped.

“No idea. I must have just been better than you in every possible way.”

Voldemort’s eyes lit up with an unholy gleam, which suggested that his patience had run out entirely. Harry, too, was eager for some sort of a confrontation to take place before Ginny’s spirit fled her body, but he didn’t feel at all prepared.

He told himself that his hands were only shaking from the cold.

“Very well. Let us see how you and the best weapons Dumbledore can provide fare against the Heir of Slytherin!”

Tom turned towards an enormous ceiling-high statue of a wizard in long flowing robes.

“Speak to me, Slytherin, the greatest of the Hogwarts four!”

Harry gulped in fear as he saw the statue’s mouth open. Something rather huge and snake-looking began slithering down.

I’m done for, was all Harry had had a chance to think before the phoenix rose up in the air, dropped the Sorting Hat onto Harry’s head, and flew over to attack the Slytherin monster.

xXxXx

Harry trudged up the Headmaster’s office stairs behind the phoenix. He was exhausted, mentally scarred, covered in dust and grime and he’d very nearly died, so he’d much rather go take a shower, or something, but the blasted bird insisted, so here he was. Ginny Weasley was walking a little behind him. The girl had been through quite an ordeal, too; upon waking up, she immediately burst into tears and apologised over and over again.

Harry stared at Dumbledore’s door, resigned, and adjusted the sword in his hand. No, he really didn’t want to go in and explain himself, but he had a feeling they would find him in Slytherin dormitories, if need be.

He knocked.

“Ah! Do come in.”

The muffled sounds of crying got louder when Harry opened the door. There was a whole assembly of people in the Headmaster’s office: the entire Weasley family seemed to be present, along with Professors McGonagall and Snape and, of course, the Headmaster. The phoenix crooned, butted Harry’s shoulder and flew off to Dumbledore’s desk, where it dropped the Sorting Hat and snatched up a sweet in the most self-satisfied fashion. Harry figured the phoenix had the right idea, so he put the sword onto the desk, too. The sound of Dumbledore’s surprised chuckle brought an end to the standstill.

“Ginny!” shouted a few voices at once.

“Oh, thank Merlin!”

Snape and Dumbledore seemed the only people who had eyes for Harry first and foremost. Snape approached him, expression boding nothing good, but thankfully he didn't have the time to say anything, because Harry found himself suffocating from a tight hug.

“Oh, Harry Potter, thank you, thank you so much for our Ginny!”

“Uh...”

“You're strangling him, Mom!”

Harry was very grateful to step away from the Weasley matriarch, but he was pounced on by the twins next. They were smiling, but their hands were trembling and their eyes were just a little too bright.

“Thanks, mate,” Fred said, attempting nonchalance.

“We knew you had it in you,” George added, clapping Harry on the back.

Harry tried to grin at them, but he was just so tired. He didn't want to be among this crowd of people thanking him for his achievements, he just wanted to lie down and forget about the whole thing. Not even the sight of Ron Weasley, who was standing there, mortified and barely able to raise his eyes to Harry's, gladdened Harry's heart at that moment.

“Harry Potter,” the father-Weasley was saying, “it's an honour to meet you. I cannot express my gratitude...”

“Let us all sit down,” Dumbledore suggested mildly. “I will only ask a few questions – it should not take long – and then the children can retire to the Infirmary. If this is alright with you?”

“Why, yes, we would of course want to know what happened – ” The mother-Weasley had to stop in the middle of her sentence because

her daughter's hysterics resumed abruptly. "Oh Ginny dear, it'll be fine..."

"Nothing will be fine, because it's all my fault!" the girl wailed in distress.

Harry winced at the volume as he lowered himself into a chair.

"Hush, dear, of course it isn't your fault that the Heir of Slytherin – "

"But I was the Heir of Slytherin! It was me who opened the Chamber and killed those roo-ooo-oosters..." She hiccupped. "I threw the diary awaa-ay but took it back... I was so afra-a-aid... I Petrified all the students..."

The Weasleys had gone chalk-white.

"Ginny, what are you saying?" Percy asked with a touch of panic in his voice.

The girl just dissolved into more tears. Harry sighed.

"Headmaster?"

"Yes, my boy?"

Harry extracted Tom Riddle's diary from the pocket of his robe and put it onto Dumbledore's desk right next to the sword and the Sorting Hat. He noticed the way Dumbledore's eyes widened for a moment; the Headmaster then took a while to peruse the mutilated book. Professors Snape and McGonagall were looking rather impatient by the time Dumbledore's examination was over, but the Weasleys had been consumed by consoling their sobbing girl.

Harry wondered, detachedly, what it would feel like to be fussed over like this.

Finally, Dumbledore gave a sigh.

"I am sure there is a fascinating story behind this notebook, my boy," he said, returning a gentle gaze to Harry. "If you wouldn't mind explaining it to us? I fear your companion is currently a little overwrought."

Harry nodded. On the way from the girls' toilet on the second floor (where Salazar Slytherin apparently had, for some bizarre reason, placed the entrance to his hidden Chamber), Harry had tried to figure out a way to describe the events to the teachers. He had not counted on having to reveal Ginny's culpability in front of her entire family; yet, there was no time for concocting a strategy now.

So he talked. And talked. He made the conversation between himself and Tom Riddle sound shorter than it had been in reality, giving the impression that they'd only exchanged a couple of insults before launching into battle. He placed most credit with the phoenix who'd pecked the snake's eyes out, mentioned that the sword had fallen out of the Sorting Hat, and concluded with stabbing the diary with a poisonous fang. He omitted the fact that Tom Riddle identified the snake as a basilisk after it had died, and left out the bit where the same basilisk fang had nearly killed Harry. He was also reluctant to reveal that Tom Riddle and Voldemort were the same person. All in all, Harry's tale implied that there had been a psychopathic descendant of Salazar Slytherin living in the diary into which Ginny had unwittingly poured out her soul, and the madman had wanted to get rid of Harry simply because he was the Boy-Who-Lived.

Judging by Dumbledore's shrewd scrutiny, the ancient wizard realized that Harry had left something out of his story. Snape, too, did not look entirely convinced, but the Weasleys had bought it all. Professor McGonagall was staring at Harry with wide eyes; it seemed that she, too, had believed his tale.

"That was very brave of you, Mister Potter," she said with a little hitch to her voice. "Brave and noble and..."

"... foolish," Snape supplied with a sneer. "Challenging the Heir of Slytherin on his own soil..."

“He was saving the life of a fellow student!” McGonagall charged at Snape immediately, the fire of righteousness burning in her eyes.

Of course. She was Head of Gryffindor; Harry’s actions must have spoken right to her heart. Harry sighed, leaned back and tuned out the teachers’ squabble, letting McGonagall fight Harry’s battles just for now. He was so exhausted he didn’t think he’d manage to utter a single word more.

He saw that Dumbledore was still looking at him. The moment their eyes met, Dumbledore let out a smile.

“Well done, my boy,” he said. “I am very proud of you. Now,” the Headmaster turned to the flock of Weasleys, “of course, I will not hold Miss Weasley at all responsible for the events and ask only that she be more careful with magical objects in the future.”

Father-Weasley muttered something about trusting things and seeing their brains. Mother-Weasley let out a relieved sigh.

“Now, I believe the matter is settled,” Dumbledore went on. “Arthur, Molly, please feel free to take Ginevra to the Hospital Wing. Minerva, Severus, I’d just like another word with Harry.”

Harry closed his eyes in frustration. He just wanted to leave. He heard the shuffle of feet, the rustle of clothing, Ginny’s sniffles and the Weasleys’ mutters as people were leaving the room. When he thought he was alone with the Headmaster, he opened his eyes – but found that Professor Snape was still in the office.

The Potions Master was frowning.

“I’m Potter’s Head of House,” he said firmly. “I have a right to be here.”

Dumbledore surveyed Snape over his half-moon glasses. There was silence for a while.

A portrait sneezed.



"If you must, Severus," the Headmaster said calmly. Harry had the inkling that the ancient wizard was not particularly pleased. "Now, Harry. Is there anything else you wish to tell me?"

Dumbledore's eyes bored into Harry's with so great an intensity that Harry lowered his eyes to the cluttered desk in front of him.

"No, sir."

Another pause descended.

"Sir – that sword – "

Dumbledore pointed to the hilt.

"This sword had once belonged to Godric Gryffindor. It is meant to come to the disposal, at times of need, to those who show great bravery and courage." The Headmaster's eyes gleamed proudly. "You must have done something worthy of the truest Gryffindor down in that Chamber for it to come to you, Harry."

He seemed extremely pleased by that fact. Snape, judging by his frightful sneer, did not share that attitude.

"I understand, sir."

Dumbledore observed him for a moment.

"Very well, then, if you have no further questions or comments," the Headmaster said amiably. "Severus, if you could be so kind as to take Harry to the Infirmary."

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Afterwards, naturally, rumours flew wild around the school. Ginny Weasley and Harry Potter had disappeared for several hours, only to be found in the Hospital Wing later, and Ginny ended up going home. At the celebratory feast the following evening, Dumbledore stood up and explained that the culprit for opening the Chamber had been identified, Professor Lockhart was gone from the school and exams

had been cancelled. Since Ginny Weasley was not there to elucidate anything, Harry was beleaguered by continuous demands from all sides to tell what on earth had happened.

He gave them a heavily edited version of the story, careful to portray Ginny's part as insignificant and his own escape as a fluke. Blaise and Millie helped fend off the enthusiastic admirers who crowded Harry now in place of ill-wishing assailants. It seemed that Dumbledore's speech had indeed cleared Harry's name; people rushed to apologize to him for their earlier suspicions, suddenly remembering again he was their Boy-Who-Lived. Harry was glad that he was no longer the enemy of the people, but the attention made him uncomfortable nonetheless. He'd much preferred the obscurity of his first year.

On a brighter note, Hagrid had been released from prison and he rushed into the castle to thank Harry profusely with tears in his eyes, all over and over and over again.

("Yeh saved me life, Harry – yeh did – yeh're a great man, Harry, I'll nev'r forget it...")

Ironically, Malfoy was the only one to realize that Harry's story didn't quite add up.

"You're lying," the blond had said, eyes narrowed. "There's no way someone named Tom Riddle would be the Heir of Slytherin – you're hiding something."

Malfoy's accusations were correct for the first time – Harry was lying to everybody – but it so happened that there was no-one beyond a couple of cronies willing to believe Malfoy's words. Harry found that it felt great to be the one with power on his side, for a change.

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Neville was overjoyed at Hermione's return to the land of the living and relieved by Harry's escape. Together, Harry and Hermione constructed Voldemort's entire story, complete with the Slytherin heir-

ness and the blasted Peverells and Merope Gaunt and the Muggle upbringing.

“Wow,” Neville commented, rubbing his brow. “So You-Know-Who was a half-blood, huh?”

Granger bristled immediately.

“Why does his blood matter?”

Neville blinked at the attack.

“It doesn’t,” he hastened to deny. “I don’t care about any of that blood nonsense, you know that, Hermione! It’s just – weird, isn’t it, that the Dark Lord who fought for Pureblood superiority was a half-blood himself?”

“Yes, I suppose it is strange,” the bushy-haired girl conceded.

“You’ve been quiet, Harry,” Neville noted.

Harry shrugged, not taking his eyes away from the lake. The surface was smooth today, the Giant Squid resting deep in its waters, and the sight was soothing, relaxing. Much better than the hustle and bustle of the school and the students who wanted a piece of Harry.

“I’ve had things on my mind,” he muttered.

“Well, look on the good side,” Neville said brightly. “The attacks have stopped, the Chamber won’t ever be opened again, and we got out of exams. It’s the summer – things are looking up. Maybe you guys can even visit me at some point over the holidays, what do you think?”

Harry smiled, cheered despite himself by Neville’s optimism.

“Thanks, Nev. That’d be great.”

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Harry stood in the Trophy Room, staring at two awards displayed side by side. Both were for Special Services to the School; one to Tom Marvolo Riddle, another to Harry James Potter. Effectively, one was for opening the Chamber of Secrets, the other for closing it. Harry could feel it, dimly – the shape of something significant forming out of the interweaving fates of these two awards.

(“We are both orphans... halfbloods... raised by Muggles... Sorted into Slytherin... the only Parselmouths to have attended Hogwarts in recent memory... even look something alike...”)

I’m not him, Harry thought firmly. I’m not even anything like him and never will be.

And yet, there was evidence. Why were there so many similarities between him and the man who’d killed his parents? Was he, really, along with Voldemort, descended from the Peverells and therefore from Salazar Slytherin? Yet then, why was he a Parselmouth, if nobody else in the Potter family had been? Maybe he should have asked Dumbledore, then, in his office, when the old man had held Harry’s gaze and given him the chance – but Harry felt insecure enough without divulging his fears and so he’d stifled his unease, buried it in the deep recesses of his mind, but it refused to abate.

While the school celebrated, Harry brooded.

He and Voldemort; they seemed to be connected by more than an attempted murder on that awful October night eleven years ago. Harry could not say that he had honestly believed Voldemort to be gone, not after Hagrid said that he was just weak and biding his time; but up until now, the threat had been shadowy and unreal, a backdrop to his life, a rifle hanging on the wall possibly to fire in some far-off, indiscernible future. Now, Voldemort was real. Voldemort was in the crimson eyes of a handsome boy in Hogwarts uniform; in the doubt coiling in Harry’s stomach as he gazed upon the trophies; in the grief lurking behind the fake smiles of the Weasley brothers. Harry could not fully grasp it, or explain it yet, but he heard the distant roar of thunder in his ears and saw the smoke of battles not yet fought before his eyes as he stared at his and Voldemort’s names displayed heedlessly side by side. He felt as if he were on the brink of

an abyss, caught before something larger than him, propelled towards a future he might not have chosen for himself, but someone else – Voldemort – seemed to have determined in his stead.

And Harry knew fear. And he knew, with certain, overwhelming clarity that his entire existence had been redefined by the events there, in the Chamber; and that things would never be quite the same for him again.

-End of year two-

III.

The TV was on in the living room when Harry came in; Dudley lounged in an armchair, while Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon sat on the sofa, watching the news.

“...the public is warned that Black is armed and extremely dangerous. A special hotline has been set up, and any sighting of Black should be reported at once.”

Harry’s heart fluttered nervously inside his chest and his palms felt sweaty as he stared at the gaunt image of the escaped convict. He’d been waiting for this, hoping that it would happen this way, but now came the really delicate stage when he could botch everything up...

Uncle Vernon, however, proceeded to give him the perfect opening.

“Hang on!” he shouted, the walrus moustache quivering in rage. “You didn’t tell us where that maniac had run away from!”

“Right you are, Vernon, these people – ”

Harry willed his face to remain calm as he interjected with an air of nonchalance:

“Oh, Sirius Black? He’s broken out of Azkaban, the wizard prison.”

For a moment, there was deathly silence. Aunt Petunia had gone an alarming shade of white, while Uncle Vernon’s face, conversely, flushed a deep red colour.

“You!” he snarled. “How dare you mention this unnaturalness under our roof – ”

Harry hoped desperately that the plan would work. Otherwise, he was sure Uncle Vernon would take great delight in punishing him for bringing up magic when he’d been expressly forbidden to do so.

“Well,” Harry said, “I figured you might want to know, seeing as this maniac had escaped from prison in order to kill me. So don’t be

surprised if you see him somewhere in this area... he probably has a wand, so try not to anger him, he has killed a dozen Muggles with one spell..."

Dudley whimpered, trying to curl into a ball in his armchair.

Uncle Vernon looked, for a moment, as if he would suffer a stroke, but then -

"What?! There's a lunatic after you who endangers my family and you're just – just – I refuse to tolerate this – this – madness! My sister is meant to be coming soon, you freak, how dare you put us all at such great risk, you worthless – out! Out! I want you out of this house and, Petunia, we're leaving! Marge can visit some other time, we're leaving now!"

Harry could only stare in amazement, vividly reminded of that time two years ago, when Uncle Vernon had insisted they all leave Privet Drive in an attempt to escape the Hogwarts letters. The chaos and the panic were very similar, except for the lack of yellow parchment cluttering the place. Uncle Vernon was sputtering and stomping around, pulling suitcases out of the cupboard under the stairs; Aunt Petunia was dashing about, trying to pack, but refusing to let go of the still petrified Dudley.

"Don't just stand around, boy, I told you to get out!"

Harry nodded obediently and, grabbing his own trunk, raced up to his room. Things were going a bit too well; he'd calculated that he'd have a couple of days before everyone left the house, so that he could warn Neville to pick him up. Now, though, there was no time. Harry would have to catch the Knight Bus Blaise had told him about – good thing he'd considered a plan B at all, or he'd have much more of a problem... Harry snorted. He'd have even more of a problem had Blaise and Millicent not informed him that his godfather had escaped from Azkaban with the goal to kill him. He'd received no official notification whatsoever. Where the wizarding authorities trying to keep him in the dark on purpose? If not for his friends and their parents' Ministry connections, Harry would not even have known he was in danger.

Hedwig hooted her incomprehension from her perch at the windowsill, snapping him out of his reverie.

“Yes,” Harry agreed.

He fumbled for stationary and penned a quick note to Neville to let him know he was coming pretty much straightaway. He hoped it wouldn't seem too rude; Harry was quite apprehensive about that Gran of Neville's, truth be told.

Hedwig pecked Harry's fingers gently as he fastened the letter to her leg. Harry smiled.

“Take it to Neville, okay? As fast as possible, if you don't mind. And stay there, I don't think I'll be coming back here this summer. Thankfully.”

Hedwig seemed to agree with Harry's assessment. She, too, quite disliked being at the Dursleys' – she ended up locked in her cage far too much of the time.

Harry sighed, watching her fly off.

“Now, what am I forgetting?”

He looked over his mail from last night, sorting what to take with him and what to leave behind. The Monster Book of Monsters was, unfortunately, coming with him. Harry looked at it sceptically and double-checked the belt holding its jaws together: he wouldn't put it past the horrid tome to come free of its bindings and eat the contents of his trunk. What next, then... Ah!

“Uncle Vernon?”

“What now, boy?”

“You just need to sign this form before I leave, saying you're letting me go, you know?”



“Hurry up, give it here, and leave already before I toss you out on your ear!”

Harry could barely contain his glee as he watched his Uncle put his signature on the Hogsmeade form without reading the document properly. He heard Dudley arguing with Aunt Petunia from upstairs:

“But, Diddykins – ”

“I want to take my TV, I want to! What is there to do in stupid Majorca, I want my computer, I want my video games, I want – ”

“Sweetums, this isn’t the time – ”

He was finally getting out of here. Harry tried very hard not to smile as he thanked his Uncle and ran upstairs to put the signed form in his trunk.

Giving a final glance to the room, he picked up the suitcase. Now for the final leg of the plan: getting to Neville’s without being killed by Sirius Black on the way.

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“And that is the window which Great Uncle Algie had thrown me out of, to see whether I had magic in me – ”

“That’s terrifying, Neville.”

“Well, I bounced back up!”

“Still terrifying. I bet you have, like, tons of traumas from that.”

“Umm. Maybe. Oh no, we’re going to be late for lunch!”

“Race you to the dining hall!”

They both ran, laughing, across the lawn towards the steps of the Longbottom Manor, only to skid to a halt outside the dining hall doors. Neither one of them would dare just burst in there, knowing that

Augusta Longbottom was probably waiting on the other side. They hastily smoothed down their hair – Harry’s attempt predictably futile – and straightened their clothes before entering the room at last.

“Ah, here you are!” Neville’s grandmother nodded sharply. “Come, the lunch is waiting. Where have you been?” Then, without waiting for an answer: “Well, no matter. Potter, do you mind explaining to me why I’ve got a letter from Albus Dumbledore, asking me to warn him should I invite you to visit in the future?”

Harry froze in the act of lifting a spoon to his mouth.

“I’m sorry – what? Ma’am?”

“A letter, boy. From Dumbledore. Are you deaf?”

Harry put the spoon back down in the soup.

“No, Ma’am. I just – I don’t know why Dumbledore is writing to you.”

Augusta Longbottom seemed to find his answer rather lacking, if the expression on her face was anything to go by.

“Does this concern me or you, Potter? There, listen: It has come to my attention that Harry Potter is visiting the Longbottom Manor as of July 31st... I would be greatly indebted to you if you could agree on such visits with me prior to inviting young Harry into your home – and why should I, Potter, can you tell me that? How is it any of the old codger’s business who visits my grandson?”

Harry was scowling.

“It isn’t any of his business. How does he even know I’m here?”

Mrs. Longbottom sent him a piercing stare.

“So Dumbledore is keeping an eye on the Boy-Who-Lived. Understandable, considering his and your position, but I resent it when conniving Headmasters try to interfere in my affairs, do you hear, Potter? I am no student and my home is not a school.”

"I apologise for the inconvenience, Ma'am," Harry answered, inwardly seething and probably doing a poor job of hiding it.

"Angry, are you?" The elderly woman smiled unpleasantly. "I am not surprised. I will be writing to Dumbledore to tell him that he has to try harder to convince me that I want to keep him informed. However, he is not the kind of man to give up easily. You are the Boy-Who-Lived, after all," she said with relish.

"That doesn't give him any right to keep tabs on me! He's not my legal guardian or anything – "

Harry was aware that his fists were clenched and that he was glaring into his abandoned meal, but he could do little to quell his fury. Not only had nobody in Hogwarts informed Harry officially about Sirius Black and the danger he posed, but Dumbledore was actually spying on him behind his back, making it his business where Harry went and whom he interacted with... He'd thought well of the ancient wizard before, though, so maybe there was a rational explanation for the – ill-chosen course of action here? Maybe Dumbledore wasn't spying on Harry while keeping him in the dark, but... doing... well... something else?

"Potter! Quit sulking." Augusta Longbottom drew her eyebrows threateningly, changing the subject. "And eat up! You're skin and bones, boy, do those Muggle relatives of yours feed you at all?"

Harry flushed and looked back down into his soup. Really, had Neville not assured him that his grandmother seemed to like him, he'd think that the woman completely detested him. Maybe Neville was delusional. That was perfectly feasible. After all, his Uncle Algie had dropped him on his head back in childhood...

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"So have you seen Sirius Black anywhere?"

"Millie, if I had, I wouldn't be alive to talk to you today."

Blaise nodded in agreement, looking uncharacteristically solemn.

“Yes, Black’s not the kind of guy you want to – why are we slowing down? It’s not yet time for us to arrive.”

Suddenly, all lights went out. It was really quite unnerving, sitting in the dark compartment while god-knows-what was happening out there.

“I really don’t like this,” Millicent said with affected calm, just as her cat mewed worriedly.

Harry peered out the window, hoping for some glimpse of -

“Wait, I think someone’s boarding the train!”

“Who is it?” Blaise asked uneasily. Clearly, Harry wasn’t the only one thinking of Black at that moment.

Distant yells were heard from somewhere beyond their compartment, next came the sound of feet running, someone swearing – and then, slowly, the door handle started to turn. Harry gazed at it, seized by horror for some reason he could not account for. He pressed himself into the wall near the window as the silhouette of a hooded figure came into view. The temperature seemed to drop by several degrees; then, the figure emitted a breathy noise, as if sucking on air, and Harry could only think a Dementor before he felt himself sliding off his seat, his vision oddly clouded. He felt so cold, as if submerged icy water, and someone was screaming – far away, and Harry couldn’t quite hear, but he was sure it was a woman...

“Harry!”

Hands were shaking him. He groaned.

“Harry, wake up, I’m warning you!”

He felt his cheek sting from a slap; wincing, he finally opened his eyes. He was lying on the floor; the lights were back on, the

Dementor was gone and the train was moving again. Worried faces of Blaise and Millie loomed over him.

“Don’t do that again.” Millie scowled fiercely. “Dropping like that – let’s get you up.”

For once, Harry didn’t reject help as Blaise and Millicent tugged him back into his seat.

“Who screamed?”

Blaise looked pale.

“No one screamed, Harry. You fainted, you must have heard it in your head – ”

Harry was going to reply – not that he had any idea what to say after he’d so shamefully fainted in front of his classmates – when the compartment door slid open once again. He tensed, but the intruder was human this time – a haggard-looking man with light-brown hair. His robes were shabby and he looked exhausted, but the wand was firm in his hand.

“Are you alright? I saw a Dementor being chased away from this compartment...”

The man trailed off as his eyes landed on Harry. Harry was not in the mood for being gawked at by the Boy-Who-Lived fans, so he chose to keep silent and wait for the stranger to snap out of it. The man’s eyes widened as he took in Harry’s appearance; he stared at the Slytherin crest on Harry’s robes for a bit, then shook his head and took a chocolate bar from his pocket.

“Here,” he said, his voice calm, and handed pieces of chocolate to the three Slytherins. “This should make you feel better. Now, if you’ll excuse me...” He nodded and, with a parting glance at Harry, took his leave.

Silence reined as Harry, Blaise and Millie nibbled on their chocolate. Harry found that it really did make him feel immediately better.

“That was weird,” Blaise commented, not specifying whether he meant the Dementor, Harry’s collapse or the odd man’s scrutiny. Millie’s black cat jumped onto her favourite perch on Blaise’s lap, demanding to be petted, and Blaise absently obliged.

“Why do you think they’d let Dementors on the train?” Millicent asked darkly.

“Because they are idiots?” Harry grumbled.

“Because a soulless Harry Potter is a lot easier to protect from Sirius Black?” Blaise suggested.

Harry grimaced and inquired in a falsely sweet tone –

“Have I ever told you, Blaise, that you’re horribly morbid?”

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Harry watched as his classmates came up to Hippogriffs one by one, bowing cautiously or, in Neville’s case, backing away in fear. He was still trying to catch his breath after that highly uncomfortable ride on Buckbeak. Honestly, if he hadn’t liked Hagrid so much... He glanced around, looking for Malfoy. Harry had seen him talking to Crabbe and Goyle before, completely disregarding Hagrid’s instructions – and it would be so like Malfoy to disrupt the lesson out of sheer spite.

The blond boy was patting Buckbeak condescendingly.

“This is very easy,” he said, giving a disdainful sniff. “I knew it would be, of course, if Potter could do it... You’re not dangerous at all, are you, you ugly great brute?”

Harry reacted on instinct; he saw out of the corner of his eye as the Hippogriff reared on its hind legs and prepared to strike, so he dove towards Malfoy and shoved him out of the way. Then, he felt pain pain pain and his vision had gone blurry from shock. He’d heard screams from other students and Malfoy high-pitched right next to his ear –

“You – you’re bleeding on me, stop bleeding on me, you – look what you’ve done, you sorry excuse of a teacher, your beast has murdered Harry Potter – ”

And then Harry felt himself being picked up and the fog in his head cleared enough for him to understand that he was lying in Hagrid’s arms and Hagrid was running towards the castle, chanting a litany of I’m sorry’s seemingly without being aware of it. Harry had tried to say it was okay and not Hagrid’s fault at all, but his arm had been jostled slightly, sending a spike of sharp pain all through his body. He bit his lip in the attempt to not cry out.

Thankfully, they arrived in the Hospital Wing quite soon and Harry was lowered onto a bed. Madam Pomfrey fussed over him and administered a healing spell and a potion to him immediately, somehow managing to question Hagrid at the same time.

(“Buckbeak – well, a Hippogriff – fer Merlin’s sake, he’s not dangerous, he’s tame as a baby!”)

The matron’s ministrations took a short while to work, but then the pain in Harry’s arm subsided and he felt more or less okay, if a little weak from blood loss. Once Madam Pomfrey left his bedside in order to jot something down on an official-looking slip of paper, Harry got his first chance to address Hagrid’s guilt.

“It’s not your fault at all!” he assured the teary giant. “Madam Pomfrey’s fixed me up and I’m good as new, see? If anyone’s to blame, it’s Malfoy.”

Hagrid’s grief transformed into fury in a matter of seconds.

“That little brat,” he growled. “Insultin’ Buckbeak – well, a Hippogriff ain’t gonna like that, is he? I’ll give him detention until the end o’ year fer that!”

“No, Hagrid,” Harry interrupted, quite alarmed. “Please don’t. Malfoy will complain to his daddy and then it will all go to hell in a hand basket.”

“To a where?”

“Never mind, just – leave Malfoy be. He’s a moron for doing what he did, but it’d be way worse if he was here, because then he’d set his father on you and he’s really influential – only... be careful with the next creatures you show us, okay? So that, you know, they’re not so easily provoked by twits like Malfoy...”

If Harry had known his plea would result in them studying flobberworms for long weeks afterwards, he wouldn’t have said anything. As it was, though, he’d managed to calm Hagrid enough for him to go and relate the incident to Dumbledore. Harry could tell that Hagrid was worried about his teaching career – it did not look good if the Boy-Who-Lived was injured in your very first lesson – but hopefully he would be okay.

Once Hagrid departed, however, the place at Harry’s bedside was taken by Blaise, Millicent and Neville. Harry’s three friends had never been in each other’s company before and unease between them was palpable. Blaise and Millie kept glancing at Neville with suspicion, while he wisely chose to sit on a different side of Harry’s bed than them. Up until now, Harry had managed to keep his Gryffindor and Slytherin friends separate, and he really wasn’t sure that the time to bring them together was now, when he was weakened by Hippogriff assault, but he would just have to roll with it.

“How are you, Harry?” Neville asked. “I didn’t really see what happened – ”

“Malfoy should really learn to keep his gob shut,” Millie said coldly. “What possessed you to take the blow for him?”

“A subconscious death wish?” Blaise raised his eyebrows.

“Piss off, Zabini,” Harry muttered. “I didn’t quite think far enough to realize the Hippogriff would get me instead of Malfoy.”

“Didn’t think,” Millicent deadpanned. “A bit Gryffindor of you, wasn’t it?”



Neville squirmed.

"I'm not sure Malfoy's worth risking your life for, Harry," he chose to say.

Judging by Millie's look, Neville had just failed some sort of a test.

"Malfoy was so scared he was green, too bad you couldn't have seen his face," Blaise noted airily, but with gleeful malice in his voice. "I have to agree with Longbottom here, though – try to refrain from jumping into the path of danger for his sake in the future, will you?"

Harry rolled his eyes.

"Sheesh, guys, one might think you're worried over me or something."

He knew he'd scored a point when both Millie and Blaise looked uncomfortable. Neville, however, only opened his eyes widely.

"Of course we're worried, Harry, there was blood everywhere and – "

"Speak for yourself, Longbottom," Millicent interjected frostily.

Neville looked lost.

"Oh Millie, you wound me," Harry droned, trying not to smirk.

"And you, Potter, are treading on thin ice," she snapped. "I'm done here. Coming, Blaise?"

"Hey, will you let me copy today's notes from you?" Harry asked.

Millie narrowed her eyes. Harry made his resemble those of a kicked puppy.

"Oh, fine," Mille huffed and stalked out.

Blaise cracked up.

“Get better, Harry, alright? The Common Room banter will be so droll without you.” He briefly glanced at Neville and inclined his head. “Longbottom.”

“See you later, Blaise,” Harry nodded. “Give hell to Malfoy for me.”

Blaise’s smirk was positively malevolent as he left the room.

Neville looked slightly shell-shocked at the Slytherin interactions. Harry found himself pitying the Gryffindor a little, so his smile was somewhat softer than normal as he uttered:

“Thanks for worrying, Nev. What happened after I got, you know, stabbed?”

“Oh, nothing much. Hagrid told us to go back to the castle and that was all.” Neville shrugged. “Hermione wanted to visit you too, but Madam Pomfrey allowed only three visitors, so...”

Harry let out a noncommittal noise. He wasn’t sure he wanted to deal with Granger right now anyway.

“How is she? I haven’t seen much of her lately,” he felt compelled to ask.

Neville smiled.

“Oh, you know Hermione, buried in work,” he said, lightening up. “She’s taking every single class on offer this year, even Muggle Studies, you know?”

“What?” Harry blinked. “How’s that even possible? Muggle Studies, of all things.” He rolled his eyes. “So how are your classes so far? You’re taking Divination, right?”

“Yeah.” Neville shuddered. “That was creepy. The Professor predicted I’d break a cup and I did, and then she told Ron Weasley that he was going to lose a trusted friend this year. Hermione thinks it’s all rubbish, but she’s also miffed because the Professor told her she doesn’t have a very good aura for the subject.” Neville snickered.

Harry stared at him.

"Hermione was in your morning Divination class?"

"Yes," Neville confirmed. "Why?"

"She was in my morning Arithmancy class, too," Harry answered succinctly.

They gazed at each other in incomprehension.

"First period today."

"Yes."

"Hermione was there."

"Yes."

They stared at each other some more.

"Does she have a Time-Turner or something?" Neville muttered.

"Yeah, right, like they'd trust a thirteen-year-old with one," Harry snorted.

However they discussed the issue, they could not find a single solution to how Hermione could be in two places at the same time. Harry had valiantly tried to convince Neville that Hermione must have magically cloned herself, but Neville collapsed in a fit of laughter and was subsequently ejected from the Infirmary by an irate Madam Pomfrey.

Harry's stay in the Hospital Wing was really boring after that.

xXxXx

Malfoy was holding court with his sycophants as he sat on a snake-ornamented couch in front of the fire in the Slytherin Common Room.

Harry gritted his teeth and tried not to listen, but it was getting increasingly unbearable by the second.

“So yes, knowing that, I just can’t believe Potter isn’t trying to hunt Black down by himself. I mean, I would, had I been in that position...”

Harry threw his quill down. Millicent frowned at him.

“Are you actually going to fall for his – ”

Harry didn’t respond as he stood up and stormed over to Malfoy’s side.

“Enjoy talking about me behind my back, Malfoy?” he snarled.

“Oh, I would say the same to your face,” Malfoy assured him serenely. “I mean, look at you, just sitting in the castle like a good boy, when the murderer of your parents is on the loose – ”

Harry’s heart skipped a beat.

“What are you talking about, Malfoy?” he demanded.

Malfoy’s eyes widened.

“Oh, you mean you don’t know?” he asked, tone delighted. “You mean nobody’s told you that your darling godfather betrayed your family?”

“I – what? You’re lying!”

“Oh no, it’s the absolute truth. Everyone knows it, of course – or, well, everyone important at the Ministry does, but they thought you didn’t need to know, huh? Well, I’ll do you a favour, Potter, since you ask so nicely.”

Harry’s hands were balled into fists.

“Malfoy – ”

“This tragic story starts way back in the day, when your father, James Potter, befriended your godfather, Sirius Black,” Malfoy said in a dramatic manner. “He was best man at your parents’ wedding and all. And then they went into hiding, because of the war, and performed the Fidelius Charm...”

Harry was aware that they’d attracted the attention of most people in the Common Room by that point, but he was only focused on Malfoy.

“So?”

“Do you even know what that is?” Malfoy’s lip curled in disgust. “The Fidelius Charm is one where the secret of someone’s location is hidden inside the soul of another person. If that person tells no-one, the secret is safe.” Malfoy smiled maliciously. Harry was beginning to see where this was going. “Sirius Black was your parents’ Secret Keeper, Potter. As soon as they performed the Charm, he went to the Dark Lord and spilled the beans. Then – whoops – your parents are dead. Very tragic. Don’t you find, Potter?”

The Common Room was deathly quiet.

“You’re full of shit, Malfoy.”

“Oh, no, this is the truth.” Malfoy shrugged. “My father told me this summer. He’s a friend of the Minister, you know? And the Minister was there when they’d arrested your godfather. He’d just killed thirteen Muggles and a wizard – ”

“Shut up!”

“And you know what the best part was? He was laughing. Laughing, Potter. He was happy he’d betrayed your parents. Your own godfather, Potter, how does that feel – ”

“I think I’ve told you to shut up,” Harry snarled in a voice he didn’t even recognize as his own.

He didn't remember the last time he'd ever felt so angry – like he'd burst, like he wanted to lash out and hurt someone the way he'd been hurt – there was lava boiling in his veins –

Malfoy looked somewhat alarmed, but continued on to say,

"Aw, Potter, don't take it so hard. Aren't you going to say thank you for letting you know?"

And then Harry lost it. He didn't know what possessed him to start hissing in Parseltongue, but it seemed to be the best way to express his fury, and then there were snakes crawling all over Malfoy, the upholstery snakes from the couch were slithering up his arms and chest and Malfoy was screaming and trying to fight them, but they were holding him down and getting at his throat and –

"Stop it, Potter!"

Someone grabbed his arms and was shaking him. Harry tried to jerk away, but couldn't, and gradually he focused his gaze and saw two Chasers from the Quidditch team, Pucey and Warrington, trying to catch his attention. They looked terrified, he noticed. Glancing towards Malfoy, he saw that the blond was grey with horror; as soon as Harry had snapped out of his trance and the snakes had stopped moving, Malfoy jumped up and away from the couch and ran for the dorm, Parkinson hot on his heels. Everyone was staring at Harry again, like they'd done after the Duelling Club incident, and Harry felt pinned by their gazes, aware that he'd been so close to doing something completely unforgivable – and, seeing the wariness on Blaise's and Millie's faces, he broke away from Pucey and Warrington and marched towards the exit. The crowd parted before him without protest; a small first year squeaked in terror as he dashed out of Harry's path.

Harry left, slamming the Common Room door behind him.

He was vaguely aware that he was trembling and that he had no clue where he was going; his mind was awl, not capable of focusing in a single thing for more than an instant – Malfoy's face, gloating, and then the same face, contorted in fear; Sirius Black from the wanted

posters; Harry's parents in the Mirror of Erised. He thought, I'll kill him and then felt horrified by what he'd nearly done to Malfoy; did he have it in him to murder someone in cold blood, if he was so disgusted with himself now – could he avenge his parents after all, hunt Black down and kill him rip him apart – oh god, he felt nauseous, and – did this make him weak or did this make him strong, that he wanted so badly to destroy something and felt so sick when he did it?

"I hate it all, Hedwig, I really do," Harry muttered, reaching a hand out to his owl, and suddenly realized that his feet had taken him to the Owlery, judging by the fact that he was here and had no recollection of anything that had happened on the way.

He thought of what he must have looked like, walking through the halls – zombie-faced, empty-eyed, oblivious to the world, a mask of hatred on his features – and shuddered.

"I hate it," he repeated.

"Hate what, Harrykins?"

He spun around to see the Weasley twins standing behind him.

"How do you always sneak up on me?" He scowled.

"It's a skill passed down through twins in the Weasley family for generations," Fred said with a straight face.

"Anyway, so what do you hate, our Slytherin friend?" George inquired, leaning against the wall and looking as if he had no intention of leaving anytime soon.

"My life," Harry snapped.

Fred's eyebrows rose.

"Is it teen angst I detect in your dulcet voice?"

"Shut it, Fred," Harry warned.

The boy raised his hands in surrender, but his eyes were still alight with mirth.

“As you wish, Your Slytherinness.” Fred bowed.

“However, what brought on this bout of contemplation?” George continued smoothly.

Harry looked at them.

“I’ve almost killed Malfoy,” he confessed blandly.

Fred and George exchanged glances.

“Since you say ‘almost’, should we assume that the slimy little git is still befouling Hogwarts with his presence?”

“Not that it would be a great loss should he stop existing – ”

“It’s not funny and I’m not joking!” Harry shouted.

Fred sighed. George looked heavenwards, as if praying for patience.

“Well, do you regret trying to kill him or not succeeding?”

Harry stared at them.

“Because, you see, if you regret that you tried to kill him, it means that there is a hope of making an upstanding citizen of you yet,” Fred explained.

“Whereas if you regret not succeeding, there’s always the next time,” George concluded.

Harry didn’t know whether to laugh or to cry.

“You’re both insane,” he said instead.

“And planning to make a career of it,” Fred agreed.



Maybe that's what friends were for: despite not having solved any of his problems, Harry felt better having talked to the crazy duo anyway.

And, although he'd been dreading the return to the Common Room, nobody said anything on the subject of his breakdown – that night or ever. The only indication that the incident had taken place, apart from Malfoy avoiding him, was that nobody dared sit on that couch again. It had become Harry's own, informally, and only he and his friends ever occupied it – at least until after he'd graduated from Hogwarts. The upholstery snakes seemed to have taken a liking to Harry, besides; they would slither around and hiss at people who dared approach. Blaise thought it was great; Millie never offered her opinion; and Harry himself felt half-disgusted, half-amused as the couch he sat on swore floridly in Parseltongue.

Disclaimer: Anything I write about Harry Potter is fanfiction. Anything JK Rowling has written about Harry Potter is canon. She makes money; I do not. We lead very different lives...

A/N: My heartfelt thanks to Gwendolyn, for being a fantastic, patient beta and providing continued support. Also, here's something I should probably have said earlier: there will be no slash and no real romance. Pairings will eventually happen – not canon ones, though – but they are very much peripheral to the plot.

Usual warning for swearing. Feedback is loved.

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Neville was getting closer and closer to a nervous breakdown as he and Harry walked together towards the Potions classroom.

"Oh no," Neville was murmuring in a daze. "Oh no. I'll fail. He'll destroy me – oh no..."

Harry looked on sympathetically.

"I know he's heard about the Boggart!" Neville exclaimed, distraught.

Harry winced. If the rumours were true – well, he wasn't surprised that Neville feared Professor Snape's reaction. The Potions Master had never given the impression that he liked to laugh at himself.

"Well," Harry said, "you have to admit it was pretty brave of you. A little too brave, even."

Neville nodded glumly.

"Wasn't my fault, though," he said. "I mean, I can't help it that my Boggart is Professor Snape, but it was Professor Lupin who came up with the whole 'dress him as my Gran' thing – I wouldn't have..."

"I don't think Professor Snape likes Lupin, either," Harry murmured. "So he might think you're in cahoots with him, or something... On the

bright side, you were everyone's hero for a while," he offered with a crooked smile.

Neville sighed.

"Apparently, being a hero comes at a price," he uttered.

"Welcome to my world, Nev," Harry replied sardonically.

He'd been wondering, actually, whether it wasn't because he was the Boy-Who-Lived that Lupin didn't let him face a Boggart when he'd had that class. Almost everyone had had a go, but Lupin had pretty much stopped the lesson abruptly when Harry's turn came. Did the Defence Professor believe that Harry was too weak to face a Boggart? He'd dealt with a bloody Basilisk last year, he was perfectly capable of taking on a measly shape-shifter! But no. No Boggarts for precious Harry Potter. He might twist his ankle as he runs away in fear.

Seriously – Harry was learning heavier spells from the guys on his Quidditch team.

"Don't bother going to your normal seat, Longbottom," Professor Snape said once they entered the classroom, giving Neville the most terrifying smile Harry had ever seen. "I believe we should get a true measure of your inability to brew. Potter, move to Mr. Nott's desk. I want to see, Longbottom, how you do on your own, without Potter whispering instructions in your ear..."

Neville gulped and looked at his cauldron with great trepidation – he couldn't brew even under normal circumstances, but today Snape was bound to be particularly vicious. Giving Neville a small nod of encouragement, Harry moved over to the Slytherin part of the classroom for the first time in two years. Well. Nott wasn't so bad, considering that Snape could have set Harry with Crabbe or Goyle; it seemed that Neville's fall from grace allowed for Harry's upward mobility in the Potions classroom. Nott frowned and made space on his desk so that Harry could put down his supplies, while Blaise grinned at Harry from his and Millie's station a couple of desks away.

"Today, you will be making a simple Pepperup Potion," Snape was saying. "Even the most dim-witted of you should be able to brew it correctly, although there is no accounting for Longbottom, of course..."

Harry watched in resignation as Ron Weasley made a derogatory comment about Snape in a misguided attempt to stand up for Neville, and Snape, being in no mood to tolerate even the slightest of indiscretions, swooped down upon him in a fury.

"For your cheek, Weasley, your little duet with Finnigan will be broken up for this lesson... Miss Parkinson, if you could take the place next to Finnigan? Weasley, move to Mr. Malfoy's desk."

Neville brewing on his own, an irate Pansy given a Gryffindor to torture, and eternal antagonists Ron Weasley and Draco Malfoy working together right behind Harry's station. This was going to be a Potions lesson from hell; they'd be lucky to escape alive.

"If you dare mess up my potion, Weasley, I'll make you wish you'd never been born," Harry heard Malfoy say. "Here, chop the Echinacea root."

Weasley could not, of course, let it slide.

"Chop it yourself, you twat!"

"I said chop it, not throw it at me!"

"I'm not your servant!"

"Well, your family could stand to earn some money, so maybe I'll let you become one, if you ask nicely."

"Fuck you, Malfoy," Ron Weasley hissed so that Snape wouldn't hear. "Like I'd ever ask anything from your Death-Eating scum of a family."

Harry sighed inwardly. He'd noticed that the Gryffindors seemed to think that the words Death Eater constituted an insult, when they

were a simple statement of fact. It was an open secret in Slytherin that the parents of many kids had been Death Eaters in the last war. Those parents might or might not have been acquitted; they might or might not still believe in Voldemort's cause; they might or might not resent Harry Potter for being the Boy-Who-Lived. You did not speak of it, one way or another. Even if you knew for certain that someone's father had been an ardent supporter of the Dark Lord and escaped prosecution only by pleading Imperius, you did not bring it up, for it was a tricky, dangerous subject.

The ex-Death Eater could neither repudiate the Dark Lord, for that would affect their standing among other ex-Death Eaters, nor could they publicly admit to having been Voldemort's willing follower, for that would land them in Azkaban. Silence on certain issues was the best way forward, even if you weren't implicated in Death Eater affairs. By the same token, if you harboured a passionate love for Muggles, it was best to keep it quiet in Slytherin – admitting to it spelled social suicide. Among Harry's friends, Blaise was quite open about his disdain for those of non-wizarding background, Millicent didn't volunteer her opinion, and the most Harry ever did was defend Muggleborns. Only someone with no appreciation for the complexities of Slytherin politics could make sweeping accusations on matters better left alone.

Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Ronald Weasley.

"Look, Weasley," Malfoy said icily, "either you start chopping, or I tell Professor Snape that you are trying to sabotage my potion, and he'll give you detention. Which one do you choose?"

In the end, Ron chose to sulkily follow Malfoy's directions, but not before noting:

"You know, Malfoy, you'd make a much better rodent than a human. Wanna meet my pet rat? You could compare notes on freeloading and stuff."

Neville's cauldron exploded not twenty minutes later, sending half the class to the Hospital Wing and thereby preventing the squabble between Weasley and Malfoy from degenerating into a full-out duel.

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Harry sat on his usual couch in the Slytherin Common Room with Blaise and Millie, relaxing after the huge Halloween feast in the Great Hall. The upholstery snakes seemed to be dozing, oddly enough; perhaps they'd had a wild Halloween party with the other serpent-decorated furniture and were now sleeping it off.

"A good day," Blaise said languidly. "I have to agree, Hogsmeade is worth all the hype."

"You were so high on sugar, you thought you saw the Grim," Millie noted acerbically.

"I'll have you know the Grim is perfectly real," Blaise huffed. "I'll soon die a tragic death and then you'll be sorry."

"Really not, though," Harry said. "I think we'll survive fine without you."

Still, Blaise was right – it really had been a fun day, and a visit to an all-magical village had been absolutely fascinating. Harry had been there once, very briefly – last year, when Professor Snape had Side-Along Apparated him from Kings Cross to an Apparition point in Hogsmeade, they'd had to walk through the village to get to Hogwarts. Ever since then, Harry had been looking forward to exploring the place properly, and today didn't disappoint. Harry had noticed, however, that the Professors weren't all that keen to let him go; good thing that he had a signed permission slip from the Dursleys. Harry was pretty sure that, had he not managed to get Uncle Vernon's signature onto the Hogsmeade form, he'd be stuck inside all day – the teachers would jump at the chance to make him stay in the safety of the castle.

One could not, after all, forget about the threat of Sirius Black.

Harry grimaced. After he'd cooled down from his initial blind rage, he'd tried to deal with the issue more rationally. Nonetheless, there was nothing rational about the murderer of his parents roaming about

free – and these days, Harry almost hoped that Black would find him, because then Harry could have his chance to confront the man, destroy him like he did Harry's life, take out on him all the anger and frustration of growing up with shit for guardians and no real memory of his parents. They would approve, Harry was sure – they'd want to be avenged, they'd want to see their traitorous friend get his just deserts... Harry wouldn't go looking for Black, no; he could recognise the rashness and stupidity of that idea. However, it didn't stop him from fantasising about the day they would meet.

"Well, next time we should definitely go to the Shrieking Shack, because they say the spirits which haunt it make the Bloody Baron seem like a sweet little firstie – "

Blaise's prattle was interrupted when the Common Room door opened and Professor Snape stepped in, looking even more thunderous than normal. All over the room, students quieted – their Head of House did not visit often, but when he did, he usually had something to say. And you did not want to annoy him by ignoring his presence.

"Silence!" Professor Snape demanded, glaring at the students. "Now, pay close attention. Sirius Black has broken into the castle and attacked the portrait guarding the Gryffindor dormitories. The search for the criminal is being conducted as we speak. In the meanwhile, you are all to line up and march in an orderly fashion towards the Great Hall. Immediately," he snapped when nobody moved. "Stay together at all times."

Students scrambled to obey. Harry felt people's gazes on him as he moved towards the exit; his thoughts were sluggish. Sirius Black was here, in the castle – should Harry go look for him? He glanced around and noticed that Blaise and Millie had taken places on both sides of Harry, and people in front and behind them were making it impossible to slink away covertly. Harry wondered briefly whether they'd done it on purpose – had he been so obvious in his desire for revenge? The idea of Blaise and Millie protecting him was a laughable one, but it was true that they did not, for all their seeming unconcern, like to see him hurt.

The Slytherins got to the Great Hall at about the same time as the Ravensclaws; Harry absently nodded at his acquaintances in that House and proceeded to hunt down Neville, ignoring the buzz of excited murmurs around the Hall. Neville was a Gryffindor – he'd be able to fill Harry in with more details. Clearly thinking along the same lines, Blaise and Millie stayed by Harry's side as he approached the Gryffindors.

"It's awful," Neville said. "Our portrait – er, I won't tell you where and who it is, or anything, but she's been attacked, all slashed up, you know? Black really wanted to get into Gryffindor."

"Too bad Harry isn't there," Blaise noted cheerfully.

"It's almost odd that Sirius Black doesn't know that," Hermione answered, frowning. "Harry is a celebrity, after all –"

"Well, here's to hoping that Black will kill Filch before the night is over," Blaise continued, giving no indication that he'd heard Hermione.

It was his usual approach with her – since he could not stop the Muggleborn from being in his presence, he chose to ignore her completely at all times. Predictably, that drove Hermione up the wall.

Hermione flushed. Neville looked about to interject, but she talked over his attempt at contributing to the conversation:

"Don't you think it's childish to pretend that I don't exist simply out of foolish, misbegotten idea of Pureblood superiority that –"

"Or at least Black can eat Mrs. Norris, I imagine it's not easy living his life as a fugitive..." Blaise contemplated serenely.

Harry paid no real attention to their exchange of monologues as he dwelled on the presence of Sirius Black within the halls of Hogwarts. Had he come to kill Harry? What would have happened if they'd met? Harry gripped his wand unconsciously, thinking of the possibilities.

"Everyone quiet down!" The stern voice of Percy Weasley cut into Harry's musings. "Lights out in ten minutes!"



“C’mon,” Harry muttered to Blaise and Millie. “Let’s get back to the Slytherin Common... floor space.”

“Hey!” Blaise said excitedly, as they walked, manoeuvring between the purple sleeping bags. “Remember about the Grim? I told you it was true! We could all have died tonight, and one portrait nearly did, so there!”

“Go cry about it to Trelawney and don’t waste our time,” Millie snapped.

Blaise sulked.

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Harry dropped his head onto the book he was reading. His eyes were really tired after hours of research on top of his homework, but he didn’t really have a choice. He had to fix his Dementor problem, just had to, and not only because Flint had ordered it in no uncertain terms. It was becoming a life hazard. What if Flint hadn’t used Harry’s once-injured arm as an excuse to get out of playing Gryffindor in bad weather? Harry would have been up there, high in the air, when he fainted – he’d be dead on impact, even if Dementors hadn’t managed to Kiss him in his unconscious state. It had been terrifying, that repeated sensation of his vision tunnelling and his mind fogging and being submerged in that memory of a woman, screaming –

(“Not Harry, no, please, not Harry, have mercy, kill me instead – ”)

Of his mother screaming, and it was sick that he craved to hear more, almost, because she was being killed in that memory, all due to bloody Voldemort and bloody Sirius Black.

His research yielded the very difficult Patronus Charm, which he was unlikely to be able to learn on his own. It was supposed to be really advanced magic, beyond OWLs even, if not beyond NEWTs. Harry was determined to master it anyway, whatever it took, even if he had to ask for help. Harry scowled, still not raising his head from the book. There weren’t many people he could ask, though. Professor

Dumbledore? A big, firm no. Harry's faith in that old man was beginning to crumble, what with the secrecy and the spying and the creepy twinkling. Professor Snape? Harry'd be lucky if he didn't get used as an ingredient in a particularly vile potion. Besides, Snape was a Slytherin; there was no need to inform him of things he could use to his own advantage. This pretty much only left Lupin, who was the Defence Professor anyway. Lupin, though, wasn't on Harry's favourite people list either, because the man seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time looking at Harry sideways – and besides, the Boggart insult was still not forgotten. The man was ostensibly kind, though, if a little strict, and generally fair to all Houses, so that left him the least worst candidate.

Harry sat up reluctantly.

Right. Onwards to Lupin's office, then, hoping for the best. At least, the man was not sick any longer – yesterday's Defence class had been taught by him and not Snape. Lupin had looked even more haggard than normal, but he still offered smiles to the class and cancelled the essay on werewolves Professor Snape had set for them.

"Harry? Oh yes, come in, of course. Would you like a cup of tea?"

It had always been Harry with Lupin, from the very beginning; not once had the man called him Potter. Yet another odd thing on the list of odd things that Lupin did. Using Harry's given name implied a familiarity they did not share, and none of the other teachers, bar Dumbledore, ever addressed him simply as Harry, so where could the man have gotten the idea?..

"No, thank you," Harry responded to the offer of tea. "I am sorry to disturb you, Professor, but I was wondering... I had actually come here to ask whether you would agree to teach me the charm to repel Dementors."

Lupin looked somewhat uncertain once he heard Harry's carefully worded request.

"I do not claim to be an expert on Dementors, Harry," he said.

“You are still the Defence teacher,” Harry countered politely. “You are more likely to know how to deal with them than anybody else in the school.”

Lupin smiled.

“I am sure that the Headmaster is much more learned than I in that regard also. I do, however see you point.”

“Then you will teach me?”

“Harry, it is quite a difficult subject matter, and while I understand your dislike for Dementors – ”

Harry held Lupin’s gaze.

“I lose consciousness when Dementors are near,” he said coolly, displeased at being forced to admit his weakness. “Last Saturday, Slytherin was supposed to be playing Gryffindor. I am the Slytherin Seeker. Had I been playing that day, I would have fallen to my death when Dementors came onto the field.”

Lupin paled.

“I see. Forgive me, Harry, I had not understood the seriousness of your situation. I... Well, in that case, I can hardly refuse to teach you.”

Of course he couldn’t; Harry’s little spiel about falling to death made it sound like his continued survival depended on Lupin’s help.

“We will not, of course, be able to practise on a real Dementor, but I am certain I can think of an alternative...”

Harry thought for a moment and made a quick decision. In for a penny, in for a pound.

“A Boggart,” he suggested.

Lupin looked startled.

“I’m sorry?”

“My Boggart,” Harry clarified. “It will most likely turn into a Dementor.”

“Will it?” the Professor asked slowly, giving Harry a long inscrutable glance. “I had assumed that your Boggart would take on the form of Lord Voldemort, which is why, as I’m sure you’ve realised, I did not allow you to face one in class.”

Harry’s eyebrows rose. That explanation had not occurred to him before and it soothed his offended pride a little. He was also quite impressed by Lupin for saying the Dark Lord’s name, which very few people ever did.

“Well.” He shrugged. “It’s not Voldemort.”

What did Voldemort even look like? Harry only knew him as the young Tom Riddle from the Chamber of Secrets.

“Yes, it seems to be another assumption I made about you.” Lupin smiled wryly. “I really ought to stop doing that...”

There seemed to be a deeper meaning behind the man’s words, but Harry could not discern it.

“Either way,” the Professor said, “I am afraid the lessons will have to wait until next semester, because I find myself with much to do until the holidays. I will, however, try to find a Boggart for us to practice on, so that we can get right to it when we start.”

“Thank you, Professor.”

Too bad that they couldn’t begin, like, right now, but Harry supposed that the promise of eventual lessons was better than nothing. He could practise the Patronus Charm on his own in the meanwhile, without a fake Dementor – maybe it would count for something once the tutoring commenced.

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"I think it's time to go inside and get a butterbeer," Padma Patil said with authority.

Harry nodded, shivering, and saw others do the same out of the corner of his eye. Terry Boot, Anthony Goldstein and Lisa Turpin looked as frozen as he felt.

It was odd company to be going for a butterbeer in, maybe, but Harry had parted ways with his Slytherin friends and Neville a while ago. Neville had gone off to Honeydukes, blushing and murmuring about buying chocolate for someone; Millie and Blaise were last seen in Zonko's, but it had been so crowded that Harry had just wanted to leave. It was then that he'd bumped into his Arithmancy classmates from Ravenclaw. Harry wouldn't call them friends, but they had a very nice working relationship and collaborated on their assignments, so it wasn't weird, exactly, to hang out with them.

Besides, Padma was quite pretty. Not that it mattered, of course.

Finally sitting down with a butterbeer, Harry nearly purred in pleasure as the warm liquid poured down his throat. Freezing temperatures ought to be abolished. Once he became the world's Prime Minister, he'd make sure of that.

"So, Harry," Padma said, her dark eyes wide with expectation, "can you tell us what had really happened with you, Ginny Weasley and the Chamber of Secrets last year?"

Harry wrinkled his nose. If there was a reason to dislike Padma, it was because she was quite nosy and giggly. It was beyond Harry how she managed to get constant E's and O's when she spent so much time gossiping.

Not that Terry, Lisa or Anthony were any less interested in his answer, if their expressions were anything to go by.

"Nothing very mysterious," Harry answered. "We were both kidnapped into it by a crazy maniac, but made it out."

Terry looked at him dubiously.

“And the maniac decided to just give up on Petrifying Muggleborns with his evil beast-o’-doom?”

“That is odd, isn’t it?” Harry agreed. “It’s all really quite fuzzy in my head and chunks of my memory are missing. I just remember Ginny Weasley crying. A lot.”

Padma huffed.

“Well, I’d cry too if I had hair that colour – ”

Anthony was sceptical.

“So what, did the Heir Obliviate you? How come you don’t know what happened?”

“I think it was so traumatic that my subconscious blocked the memories,” Harry told them seriously. “I don’t mind, really. I’d rather not remember.”

That part, at least, was true.

The Ravenclaws looked only half-convinced. Harry sighed inwardly; the partial amnesia excuse was the best he could come up with, considering that the truth would make Ginny Weasley an outcast in the school. He still thought the people who’d been Petrified deserved to know what had happened to them – maybe not now, but eventually. Currently, though, it was best for the matter to remain hushed up; the rumours Ginny had to deal with were bad enough as it was. And he wasn’t keen to publicise his own role in the events, either – he got enough credibility in Slytherin for being considered an heir of Slytherin. Telling them he’d been fighting a teenage Voldemort would not be a very bright move considering the number of ex-Death Eater’s kids in the House.

Lisa seemed to sense Harry’s dislike for the subject: although Ravenclaw curiosity was still clear in her eyes, she had enough tact to divert Padma’s attention.

“So, have you looked at homework Professor Vector set for us last time? That chart is giving me some problems...”

Within minutes, they were having a heated discussion on whether or not Pythagoras had relevance to their assignment. Oddly enough, Harry realized once they were done and about to leave, it had been refreshing, debating with them like this. The Ravenclaws did not allow him to space out, which meant that he had to concentrate on the subject and not wallow in his own thoughts. Besides, there was of course the added benefit of getting ahead on his homework – even if he currently felt that he could think no more.

“We should do this again sometime,” Padma said decisively.

Everyone nodded and Anthony went on to say:

“We’d better arrange to have our notes with us, because then I’d be able to prove to you that Pythagoras – ”

“ – is completely useless here,” Terry insisted.

“Oh please, no,” Harry muttered, because his brain was actually starting to break a little.

He wove between tables after Padma and Lisa, trying to tune out the ongoing debate between Terry and Anthony. Salvation came from an unexpected source.

“Hey, Harry!” Cedric Diggory was grinning at him from one of the booths they were walking by.

Harry smiled politely back.

“I’m looking forward to our Quidditch match,” Diggory said cheerfully.

Harry resigned himself to stopping for a chat; Terry and Anthony paused too and quieted down. Finally.

"Slytherin will have to defeat Ravenclaw first," Harry answered, smirking at the Ravenclaw boys.

Anthony raised an eyebrow.

"You wish, Potter."

"Quite exciting, isn't it, all of our teams having good Seekers?" Cedric beamed. "Our team has improved a lot, and Ravenclaw has Cho Chang, and Slytherin has you – "

"Gryffindor's isn't stellar," Terry noted.

"Dean Thomas," Anthony agreed. "He'd be a better Chaser. Gryffindor hadn't won the House Cup ever since Charlie Weasley graduated."

"I know." Harry rolled his eyes. "I've heard all about it from the twins. I think they might de-age their brother just to win the Cup, they're that desperate."

Cedric looked at him in interest.

"You're friends with the twins?"

"Well – "

"Quite an interesting Slytherin, aren't you?" the older boy laughed.

Harry didn't know what to say, but he was rescued by Padma's displeased –

"Where are you, aren't we leaving?"

Harry kept his gaze determinedly off the wanted poster displaying Sirius Black's deranged face as he walked out on the street.



Disclaimer: I own it not.

A/N: In every author's note, I have to restrain myself from rambling on about the story. I confess, I have never felt the urge to do so as strongly as with this chapter, but I'll persevere. Moving on: thanks to the anonymous reviewers! G was especially thoughtful. Two people tried to leave intriguing links – they didn't display correctly, but I appreciate the sentiment.

Usual thanks to Gwendolyn, for she is all kinds of amazing. I should add, however, that one and a half scenes in this chapter are unbeta'ed, because Gwendolyn will not, for some reason, devote her whole life to beta'ing OWG. Well, the previous chapter does contain a scene she's read five different versions of, so I'm not even close to complaining.

Warning for swearing – in fact, the rating goes up to M just in case (and because it would sooner or later, anyway).

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In the week after the Christmas holidays, Professor Lupin invited Harry for his first Patronus lesson. Harry turned up a little early, but waited barely five minutes before Lupin arrived, carrying a large packing case.

"Good evening, Harry," the man said pleasantly. "I've brought a Boggart – found it in Mr. Filch's filing cabinet. If it does turn into a Dementor upon seeing you, our job will become significantly easier."

"I understand, Professor."

"So..." Lupin nodded, seeing that Harry already had his wand out. "The spell I am going to try and teach you is highly advanced magic – well beyond the OWL requirements. It's called the Patronus Charm."

"I know, sir," Harry said. When the Professor's eyebrows rose, he elaborated: "I've researched it. Before I went to see you the last time."

Lupin appeared to be surprised.

“You – have? Oh. That’s very diligent of you. I trust that you don’t need the basic explanations, then?”

“No, Professor.”

The man was considering Harry as if he was trying and failing to fit him into a formula of some sort.

“Have you maybe even practised the charm?” Lupin inquired cautiously.

“Yes, Professor.”

“Well.” The teacher stepped away and made a sweeping gesture with his arm. “Would you mind demonstrating for me, then? Without a Dementor?”

Harry inhaled deeply. This always took quite a bit of effort from him, but, unless he was mistaken, Lupin was about to be greatly impressed.

“Expecto Patronum!”

A silver stag erupted from Harry’s wand. Harry bit his lip, trying to maintain concentration, but had to give up after a couple of seconds.

“I can’t keep it going for very long, but – ”

The expression on Lupin’s face was absolutely priceless. He seemed to have turned into a stone statue and was staring at the place the stag had vanished from with eyes that were round from shock.

“Um, Professor?”

“That was – amazing, Harry. That you’re capable of – it’s very advanced magic, I’m – ”

“Well, I have been practicing all the time for the last two months,” Harry pointed out. “Besides, I don’t know what I’ll be able to do against a Dementor. Maybe this is useless.”

“Oh no!” Lupin came to life abruptly. He looked almost proud as he gazed at Harry. “It’s not useless! It’s fantastic that you have that sort of focus and concentration – it means you’ve already mastered that part. It’s going to be very different with a Dementor, but I’m convinced you can do it with time, Harry. Just don’t get upset if it doesn’t happen on the first try.”

Harry nodded obediently – and yet, he had been very upset when it really did not happen on the first try. He’d hoped, irrationally, that his Patronus would work against a Dementor, but there’d only been a wisp of white smoke and please not Harry and chocolate once Lupin had helped him get up.

“Really, Harry, don’t worry about it,” the teacher reassured him. “Half of your job is done – you just need to work at it and eventually you’ll get it.”

Harry had smiled politely and agreed, but he still insisted on practising until Lupin had to pretty much bodily remove him from the Defence classroom.

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“Maybe we should post it somewhere that you’re a Slytherin,” Neville said darkly. He was still trembling a little from his Gran’s Howler about forgetting passwords and endangering classmates. “So that Sirius Black would just stop trying to get into Gryffindor.”

Harry shot him an incredulous glance.

“And lay siege to the Slytherin dorms instead? Thanks, Nev.”

“Personally, I find it quite hilarious,” Blaise said, catching up to them in the corridor. “All the Gryffindor blood spilled for nothing...”

Neville blanched.

“There had been no blood.” Harry sighed impatiently.

“But Sirius Black had nearly stabbed Ron Weasley to death – right in our dorm!” Neville protested.

Harry silenced Blaise with a look. He’d learnt that one from Millie. It was a speak-and-you-die-a-painful-death sort of a look, which Harry thought he pulled off rather well.

“Ron is really annoying now, though,” Neville continued. “He won’t stop talking about the attack and how brave he’d been. And he is on Hermione’s case for her cat eating his rat – not like it’s Hermione’s fault. And everyone is angry with me for losing the passwords...” he trailed off miserably.

It sounded like life in Gryffindor was not fun for Neville or Hermione right now.

“Well, at least I should have some time over the weekend to help you with Potions,” Harry said, changing the topic drastically.

“Oh good.” Neville brightened. “I really can’t keep on failing miserably, seeing as it’s February already... I don’t understand how you can be so good at it.”

Harry chose not to mention that he got so good at Potions because of Neville.

“Then again, Professor Snape is not as mean to you as he is to me,” Neville added gloomily.

“Well, that’s probably because I keep a low profile both in and out of class.” Harry shrugged. “Not much to be mean to me for, is there?”

Harry must have jinxed his luck right then, because Snape made him stay back after the Potions lesson, for the first time in his Hogwarts career, the very next day. Apparently, the Professor had found out about the private training Harry was getting from Lupin – and he was positively furious.

“First you pull that stunt with the Gryffindor’s Sword, now you ingratiate yourself with Lupin – some Slytherin you are, Potter!”

Harry, unwisely, tried to argue.

“I didn’t realise it was wrong to come to a teacher with a problem – ”

“But of course, you had to choose that teacher, didn’t you?” There were twin spots of colour on Snape’s sallow cheeks and his black eyes were narrowed in anger. “Out of all the teachers in this school, you turn to that inhuman creature – ”

Harry felt that his Head of House was being quite unreasonable.

“With all due respect, sir, he’s the Defence Professor and I’ve noticed nothing inhuman about him.”

Snape raised an eyebrow. How he managed to make the gesture so malicious Harry didn’t know, but he had to contain the urge to step back.

“Well, that’s odd, isn’t it, Potter? Considering that Lupin is a werewolf.” And then, seeing the incredulity on Harry’s face: “What, didn’t noble Lupin confide in you? How clumsy of me. I seem to have exposed his secret.”

Harry was staring at Snape.

“Professor Lupin’s – he’s not – ”

“Don’t you try to tell me what he is and what he is not,” the Potions Master hissed, and this time Harry did actually back away a little. “Haven’t you noticed the way Lupin tends to fall conveniently ill during full moon? No? I take it you did not complete the essay on werewolves I’d assigned, Potter? Lupin was in a hurry to cancel that piece of homework, was he not?”

Well, yes, but...

Professor Lupin was so mild-mannered, soft-spoken... a werewolf? Harry would be looking into those lunar charts to see whether they matched Lupin's absences, because he sure as hell wasn't taking Snape at his word. At the same time – would he really lie about something that was not very hard to check? Well. If it was true, it might explain why Harry always felt that Lupin was hiding something. What was Dumbledore thinking, if he had indeed hired a werewolf? How did they control him? Who would be answerable if Lupin bit someone despite, Harry was sure, the best of intentions?

“The Headmaster - ?”

“Tends to believe in the goodness of humans. Even of those who are not, exactly, human.”

Snape's eyes were shadowed as he said that.

Harry felt lost. He wasn't sure he was comfortable going back to Lupin's classroom now, considering that the man was liable to eat him when the moon turned round, but he was not going to let the lessons stop. He was getting better and better at producing a real Patronus with the Boggart Dementor. It had taken him a long while – he had heard the deaths of his parents from the moment Voldemort had stepped through their door, numerous times – and he wasn't giving up now, after putting himself through that.

“I'm sorry, sir, but my meetings with Professor Lupin are important, even if he might be a...” Harry shook his head.

Werewolf. His Defence Professor. What was Lupin going to do, give the class a lecture on the best way to kill their teacher?

The Slytherin Head of House observed Harry for a long moment, face obscured by a curtain of greasy hair. Harry tried not to squirm under his heavy gaze.

“Do you, Potter, also share the Gryffindor trust in all and sundry? Do you believe that people are inherently good and nobody can possibly harm you?”

“Of course not, sir.”

“Do you agree that Lupin is dangerous?”

“He – could be, sir.”

“And yet, you are planning to persist in this foolishness.” Snape gave an ugly sneer. “Does Lupin feed you cakes, Potter? Does he pat you on the head and listen to your woes? Does he promise to rescue you from evil Slytherins?”

Harry bristled.

“I don’t think that Slytherins are evil,” he said, gritting his teeth.

And no adult had ever fed him cakes, or patted him on the head, or listened to his woes. So Snape could cut the patronising act.

“Slytherins are also not witless, which you unfortunately are, Potter. Get out of my sight. You are working with Longbottom again next week.”

All in all, Harry had been deeply unsettled by the whole discussion. Not only did he find out that his Defence teacher and Patronus tutor was probably a werewolf, but this was also the longest conversation he’d ever had with his Head of House. It had provided Harry with a lot to think about – and he decided that it would be prudent to give Professor Snape a wide berth for a while. The Professor had always been annoyingly condescending, antagonistic, and unjust, but that was all right as long as he didn’t actively try to harm Harry. Harry was, however, getting the distinct impression that he’d been treading on a knife’s edge with the man ever since getting Sorted into Slytherin – and he did not want to lose his balance.

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Hermione was fidgeting. It wasn’t in her nature to fidget; when Hermione was in the Library, she might mutter under her breath, or scribble something frantically, or sit engrossed in a book – but such a level of distraction was unusual.

Harry sighed and looked around to check that no one was listening. Madam Pince seemed to be preoccupied with sorting several incunabula; no students were in sight.

“Hermione? We’re okay, right?”

Hermione gave him an uncertain smile.

“Of course.”

They’d had a bit of a falling out last week, when Harry and Neville finally confirmed once and for all that Hermione was using a Time-Turner to get to all her classes. They’d been watching her in the Arithmancy and Divination, both of which Hermione attended at the exact same time – in such a situation, it would be easiest for her to slip up. They’d noticed that she occasionally fiddled with something on her neck after one of the classes – but never after both. From there, it was part research, part badgering Hermione, but Neville turned out to have been right all along: Hermione was in possession of a Time-Turner.

(“Professor McGonagall got a special permission for me to use one – but it’s supposed to be a secret, so don’t tell anyone you’ve figured it out, or I will get in trouble!”)

And Harry hadn’t meant to have an argument with her about it; it was her business, after all. However, he failed to see what entitled Hermione, out of all the students at Hogwarts, to a Time-Turner – because taking Muggle Studies did not seem like a valid enough reason to be granted one. And his incomprehension was, of course, his own problem and he’d get over it – but then Hermione gave him the I deserved it on my own merits spiel, which did annoy him. Because, yes, Hermione was clever, but she wasn’t the only clever student in Hogwarts – and it seemed pretty obvious to Harry that she got the Time-Turner for being a teacher’s pet and McGonagall’s personal project. Not that there was anything wrong with that; Harry would have agreed to a Time-Turner too, in her place. Hermione, on the other hand, kept insisting that it was already mid-March and she



hadn't caused a time paradox yet, which meant that she had to be worthy.

And Harry could not explain to her that causing a time paradox figured very little into why he was peeved, so he left the matter alone.

Things had been strained for a week. Now, when Neville wasn't around to act as a buffer, the elephant in the room was getting increasingly harder to ignore.

"Look, it's not that I'm angry at you for using the Time-Turner. Not at all, really – "

"No, I think I understand," Hermione said, interrupting him. "It's just... I don't like it when you compare me to them."

Harry blinked.

"Them?" he repeated.

"Yes, them. Those Purebloods – it's enough for Malfoy to say his name and he's suddenly somebody without having to do anything to deserve it. I'm not like them, Harry. I work hard for every grade I receive. I don't have a flashy surname – everything I've achieved, I've done it through my own effort."

"Of course," Harry agreed. "Er, but it's not like the Purebloods get good grades just for existing – look at Neville in Potions..."

Hermione waved an impatient hand.

"I don't mean grades, but... the wizarding world is so insular. All the Purebloods know each other, or at least of each other, and if you're not in that circle, you don't mean anything to them. And if you work hard to be acknowledged, like I have, they just scoff at you and tell you you're a know-it-all with mud for blood – I mean, even your friend Zabini can't stand me."

“Blaise doesn’t like Muggles or Muggleborns.” Harry shrugged. “And I don’t think he’s right, but you don’t seem to like Purebloods, which isn’t fair either.”

Hermione deflated a little.

“It’s not that I don’t like Purebloods,” she said. “It’s foolish, attaching a label like that. Neville is not like Malfoy. At the same time, though – I don’t understand them. They seem to speak in code half of the time; it’s like their whole world is an inside joke. Family names are one of those things – even to Neville, even to Ron Weasley, you can say, I don’t know, Bulstrode and they will tell you, oh yes, one of those. And if you belong, then you know which those it is, and if you don’t, you don’t. And everyone knows that you don’t know and they treat you as a foreigner of some sort. I mean – do you see what I’m talking about?”

“Yes.”

Oh, Harry saw. Maybe it was by virtue of being in Slytherin, but he’d realised this a very long time ago and had learnt to act accordingly.

“Then – ” Hermione’s eyes were wide, eager. “How do you cope? I mean, if you don’t know their secret code either, then how do you – blend in so well?”

Harry scrunched up his nose. This was really awkward, but –

“Hermione, they usually forget that I don’t know the code.” When Hermione didn’t seem to catch his meaning, he went on: “I’m the Boy-Who-Lived and a Potter. They take it for granted, a lot of the time, that I would know what they do.”

Hermione frowned.

“So really, having a flashy name is the only way to get past the velvet ropes.”

“Well, the Purebloods might not accept you into their circle, but being accepted there is not the only way to become a part of this world – ”

"I hate it that some people will always see me as a second-class citizen," Hermione said flatly. "But I'm not going to let them intimidate me. I have as much right to be here as they do."

Maybe Harry had been surrounded by Purebloods for much too long, but he could hear Blaise's voice running a counter-argument in his head: excuse me, but we have infinitely more right to be here, since this is our world; take your whining somewhere else if you don't like it. He figured this wasn't the time or the place to play the Devil's advocate, however.

He wondered, also, whether it wasn't the determination to always stand up for her beliefs that had landed Hermione in Gryffindor instead of Ravenclaw; he could definitely see her starting up some sort of a commission for the rights of Muggle-born children one day.

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"Oh, and b'fore yeh go, Harry – look what I've found in me house!"

Harry didn't bother to hide his incomprehension.

"A rat?"

That was special – or hygienic – in what way?

"Not just any rat, Harry, Ron Weasley's rat." Hagrid smiled. "He'd lost it, yeh see, an' thought yer friend Hermione's cat ate it back in February, an' it's already June – but here it is. You don' mind takin' it back ter him fer me, do yeh?"

Harry did mind, actually – although Ron Weasley underwent some attitude adjustment in the wake of his sister's trip to the Chamber, he and Harry were still not on speaking terms. Or nodding terms, or waving, or greeting-exchanging terms, really.

Hagrid was looking at him expectantly.

"Oh, fine," Harry acquiesced.

“Good of yeh, Harry! Now, off yeh go – it’s gettin’ close ter curfew!” Hagrid admonished, opening the cabin door. “And thank yeh fer comin’ ter see me!”

Harry smiled at Hagrid absentmindedly, trying to keep hold of the squirming rat.

“Bye, Hagrid – do you even want to be taken to your master, you ugly creature?”

The rat squeaked and squirmed some more.

“If you don’t quit it, I’ll feed you to a snake and say you’ve run way,” Harry told it conversationally. “I’m a Parselmouth. I can call lots of hungry snakes here. I don’t really care whether or not Weasley gets you back, you know.”

Amazingly enough, that threat had actually worked. The rat gave one last terrified squeal and subsided. Harry halted his steps to stare at the rodent: did he speak some other animal language, like the rat equivalent of Parseltongue? Because this was kind of disturbing.

And then, all of a sudden, Harry felt movement behind him, and something slammed into him, hard.

Harry fell on the ground, squeezing the rat tightly in one hand and trying draw his wand with the other – what was...? He turned to see a gigantic black dog looming over him, fangs bared, breath foul –

“Petri-”

- but the dog jumped out of the way and “-ficus totalus” missed it completely. While Harry was finishing the incantation, however, the dog had morphed into a man with a long, gaunt face and filthy hair.

Harry’s mouth went dry with fear – this was Sirius Black right next to him, and he aimed his wand –

“Don’t look at me like that, I deserve your anger, but Harry, you’ve got to give Peter to me – you fucking traitor – just give him to me, Harry...”

And Harry’s shock was abruptly replaced by fury and he focused on it, basked in it, channelled it into his wand when he fired the next hex. He was going to kill the bastard who’d betrayed his parents – but Black dodged, again, and he seemed a little impatient now:

“Peter, Harry, I won’t harm you, you don’t believe I’ll harm you, just give me fucking Peter!”

And the rat was squirming and the murderer was raving and Harry was shouting:

“I’ll kill you, you fucker, Av-”

- but Black’s own wand was already in his hand and he barked an Expelliarmus, sending Harry sprawling again and ripping the wand from his grasp.

“Give me the rat, Harry.”

Black’s voice sounded oddly sane all of a sudden. Harry looked down dumbly at the rat he was squeezing to death in his left hand.

“You – this rat?”

“Yes, Harry, I want this rat, now give him to me!”

The crazed murderer was aiming Harry’s own wand at him and for a moment, Harry just wanted to leap and claw at his face and bite and kick –

“One day, I’ll hunt you down and kill you,” he snarled, flinging the rat at Black.

The man caught the rodent with a half-giddy, half-vicious expression on his face.

“Fine, kill me, but I get to kill him first,” he said and then transformed back into a dog.

Harry’s wand fell on the grass, unheeded; Harry dove for it, hoping to fire a spell at the dog’s back, but it had already bounded away with its prey between its teeth and disappeared from view by a large tree.

Harry was left sitting on the ground alone, feeling strangely empty for being so furious still. He’d dreamt about this moment, fantasized about facing Black and destroying him, incapacitating him and then delivering a speech on how he’d make him suffer and how he hated hated loathed him. He knew Black was a murderer and a Dark wizard from the House of Black, but Harry had defeated a basilisk, managed to scare even some older Slytherins, perfected a corporeal Patronus – something that was beyond many wizards. He’d thought himself – capable. He’d thought that, when the time came, he’d be able to extract revenge, to hold his own, to win, damn it, but it all came to – nothing.

To sitting on the grass with a wooden stick in his hand and listening to the sound of his illusions shattering. None of his lessons had prepared him for this, for looking the murderer of his parents in the eye and realizing that he couldn’t do a thing.

“I meant what I said,” he whispered brokenly. “I hope you fucking die. And I hope I’ll be the one who kills you.”

And yet, the words rang hollow. Harry had failed to back them up just a short while ago; instead of a glorious confrontation, there had been a humiliating defeat.

Why, why did it have to be that way? Because I was a fucking idiot, Harry thought harshly. Gritting his teeth, he swore that he’d never, ever, make the mistake of overestimating himself like that again. He was clearly not good enough to fight Black now, but... Fuck it, he would train, and he would prepare, and he would get strong. And then he’d become someone his enemies would fear.

For now, though...

He was still alive after a run-in with Sirius Black; that was good. Life did not end here, even if Harry felt like it kind of had ended. He'd just have to – face it, like always, suck it up and keep going. He could attempt to have Sirius Black thrown back in jail, too; it probably wouldn't amount to anything, but he'd report the bloody sighting.

Harry stalked towards the castle entrance, fuming.

The school was awesomely protected that a deranged maniac could get in through all the wards and an army of Dementors several times, all without getting caught.

There were not many people in the halls at this time – it was almost curfew after all – and Harry's legs took him to Lupin's office quite independently of his brain. He stared at the office door for a while and then knocked.

"Harry?"

Professor Lupin looked rather pale and ill, but Harry paid no heed.

"Sirius Black is here," he said without preamble and watched Lupin's face blanch. "He's just attacked me."

"But you are – "

"He's insane," Harry bit out. "He only wanted a rat and then he escaped. He's an Animagus, by the way."

"Come in, Harry – "

"No." Harry found it very hard to stay within the limits of common politeness. "I just came to tell you that Sirius Black is on Hogwarts grounds. Aren't you going to – "

"Wait, Harry, did you say he wanted a rat?"

Harry scowled.

"Yes."

“Did he say anything about it?”

“Not sure. He kept ranting about some Peter.”

Lupin’s face had gone, impossibly, even paler. He seemed to take a couple of moments to compose himself.

“... and tonight of all nights. Holy mother of Merlin. Forgive me, Harry, I’m a little out of sorts. Are you sure he said Peter?”

“Yes.”

“Well, he might be delusional. It’s best to inform Dumbledore in any case. I’ll – oh Circe, my potion. I’ve nearly gone off – ”

Lupin leaned against the doorframe, appearing completely overwhelmed. Harry found that he cared very little for the drama unfolding inside his Professor’s head.

“I’ll go, then.”

He left without waiting for permission. Finding an unused classroom and hexing everything inside it to smithereens seemed like an exceedingly good idea at the moment.

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“Parvati and I are definitely going to the World Cup this summer – I mean how often is it held in Britain?” Padma said, sitting down in their compartment on the Hogwarts Express. “Not that I care that much about Quidditch, but...”

“Indeed. Not a very intellectual sport, is it?” Blaise raised an eyebrow.

“The fact I’m very clever doesn’t mean I don’t have fun,” Padma huffed and eyed Hermione. “Unlike some people, of course.”

Hermione raised her chin high.



"I'll have you know I've passed every single class on offer this year with top marks and balanced it well with my social life."

"Does helping Longbottom with homework really count as social life?" Millie asked.

"Oh, lay off Longbottom, Millie," Blaise drawled. "He can't help being stuck in Gryffindor. I'm sure we'd make a decent human being out of him in Slytherin."

"No Longbottoms have been in Slytherin for centuries," Neville said mildly.

Harry was only half-listening to his friends' banter. His mind was still on the conversation with Lupin, in which a lot of important revelations had been made. Such as, for example, that Sirius Black had been innocent, after all, of betraying Harry's parents, but was now guilty of murdering Peter Pettigrew. The latter, on the other hand, had spent the last twelve years masquerading as Ron Weasley's rat out of fear for – life in general, probably. It also came out that Lupin had been Harry's father's best friend, or one of, among Sirius Black and Peter Pettigrew. His dad sure had shit taste in friends: a werewolf, a murderer and a traitor. Lupin was now, apparently, planning to search for Black, who'd escaped into the night after killing Pettigrew, leaving only a note to the effect of I killed him, but not James and Lily. Lupin also said that Dumbledore had shown Pettigrew's corpse to the Minister, but that had only resulted in the Ministry deciding to hush everything up – the charges against Black stood, because Pettigrew's corpse proved nothing except that he'd been alive for longer than everyone had thought.

("I know it's going to be difficult after seeing his face all over the newspapers, Harry, and it's come as a shock for me too, but Sirius really is innocent of betraying your parents. If he'd only trusted me... if I had only believed in him...")

Harry supposed that Lupin had told him all of that in order to put him at ease, somehow, but Harry only felt a weary sort of anger. Coming clean with him was all well and good, but firstly, Harry wasn't sure there weren't more secrets hiding behind Lupin's amber eyes – the

man had not, after all, seen fit to mention the fact that he was a werewolf – and secondly, Harry felt that this openness came much too late. Who thought it had been a good idea to keep him in the dark for the entire year? Lupin's story was the first time any adult had officially told Harry of the whole deal with the Fidelius and the Secret Keepers and the like. And it was great that Lupin had been a friend of James Potter, but why did he never mention it – not like there hadn't been opportunities, what with the Patronus lessons every week. Was it because Lupin viewed Harry as a potential burden? Or did he disapprove of the way Harry had turned out? Or was it simply because James Potter and his gang of friends had been Gryffindors, whereas Harry was a Slytherin and, in Lupin's own words, so different from his dad?

("I'd never expected you to be – you are so unlike James. Not just because you're a Slytherin, but you're more serious than he ever was and – ")

Of course, Lupin said that Harry's dad would be proud of him. Of his determination, maturity, success with the Patronus Charm... and yet, it wasn't enough. There still seemed to be a deep rift between them – between Harry and his father's surviving friends. Harry had been polite with Lupin, but he quietly resented the man for his silence – he did not tell Harry anything this year, and had never contacted Harry before, despite claiming to care. And while Lupin had been a great Defence Professor and couldn't help being a werewolf, Harry couldn't dismiss his Lycanthropy as an insignificant detail. And no matter what Lupin said, Harry could not and did not even try to forgive Sirius Black. The man might have been innocent of the crime he'd been chucked in prison for, but Harry remembered Black's crazed eyes and his own suffocating hatred. The name Sirius Black still sent a shiver of loathing down his spine. The man had seen Harry at his weakest; had reduced Harry to his weakest. Harry could learn from it, but he was not sure he could ever forgive. Or whether he would ever even want to.

"Harry, seriously, wake up!"

Harry shook his head and saw that his friends were staring at him in amusement.

"I – sorry, guys. Spaced out for a bit. You were saying?"

"I was saying that we should try to meet up over the summer," Padma said, rolling her eyes. "And – oh, the food cart should be here soon! I'm craving chocolate!"

"I'm not paying for you again," Harry said firmly.

"Why not?" Padma asked, batting her eyelashes.

Hermione looked at that display with disapproval.

"Your love for chocolate could drive the House of Potter into destitution," Harry told Padma.

"Yep, the goblins will kick you out of Gringotts and laugh at your misery." Blaise nodded happily. "And then the Meliflua family will prevail in their feud against the Potters."

"You know the Melifluas have died out, Blaise," Harry countered. "Even in poverty, the Potters shall triumph."

"Why does this sound familiar?" Neville wondered, wrinkling his forehead.

"That would be because Harfang Longbottom killed the last Meliflua in battle," Blaise rolled his eyes.

"How do you know?" Neville asked, surprised.

"Zabini here is an aspiring historian," Millie said dryly.

"Hey, history is interesting!" Blaise protested.

Everyone stared at him; even Hermione looked sceptical.

"Well, not the way Binns tells it, but it really is. You're just a bunch of illiterate morons."

Hermione made an indignant noise, but it drowned in the cacophony of arguments. Neville was saying something about his Gran and interest in Herbology, Padma was claiming a long string of very literate Ravenclaws in her ancestry, and Millie was explaining why Blaise would die alone and eaten by werewolves.

Harry sat back, smiled and felt, for a fleeting moment, at peace.

-End of year three-

Disclaimer: Harry Potter is not mine.

A/N: Huge thanks to Gwendolyn, my beta of saintly patience. I'm actually thinking of searching for a second beta, just to take some workload off of Gwendolyn and make sure she survives OWG with her sanity intact.

Now for the warnings. For one thing, there is a lot of swearing. Secondly, and more importantly, the very first scene has disturbing content. Or potentially disturbing. So, um, read at your own risk and beware of squick.

IV.

Harry sat on the cold tile floor of the Dursleys' bathroom and contemplated his life. Well, maybe not his entire life – but he did wonder whether he should embrace the toilet bowl again and attempt to expel the remains of his most recent nightmare by forcing them up his throat. Harry had had his share of freaky dreams – it tended to happen if you came into contact with basilisks, murderers and Dementors – but this one, this one took the fucking cake.

("Let the innocent blood flow... let life to be exchanged for life... let the sacrifice take true hold...")

Harry heard distant chanting and his vision cleared only gradually; when it had, he found that he was looking at the world from a really strange perspective – he seemed to be small and held reverently in someone's arms. Harry knew this man. He'd done everything right; he'd done the ritual right, for Harry was here now, breathing in a corporeal body once again. He felt his body was disproportionate; the head was too large and the arms and legs were much too small, and his skin was blackened and shrivelled, and he was probably hideous. Harry gave a cold smile. Physical beauty was something that had ceased to matter to him a long time ago; power, on the other hand, was everything.

("You have done well, my faithful... Show me. Did you have to hold her under the Imperius?")

Harry had been turned around in the arms of the man who was holding him, so that he could observe his surroundings. A little distance away, in a circle of rune-marked stones, there lay a woman. Harry knew who she was, too; she had been foolish enough to venture too close to where he had dwelled – she had been unable to guard her secrets. And secrets she did hold, some beautiful, powerful secrets. She could not be allowed to keep them; Harry had to know everything. Her mind had been broken, of course, but he had only needed her body. A broken mind was vulnerable to possession... She was still there somewhere, inside that thick skull of hers. How far she had come from the nosy, infuriating female she had once been! Lying there, naked, in a pool of blood, her own and sacrificial, her face locked into an expression of utmost agony.

(“No, my faithful, I forbid you to kill her... She is not yet entirely useless. Bertha will serve me yet... someone has to tend to me while you are away on your mission...”)

Harry preferred her like this, an empty-minded marionette. No doubt, if she could, she would have struggled against being a host to Harry as he travelled to the land where he'd once failed. She was but a vessel; Harry was not interested in her little tantrums. She had served her purpose: her womb and the seed within had been used in the darkest of magics. Unborn children had no minds to speak of; possessing, warping, twisting, owning – all a matter of a brief, nigh inexistent struggle and then death; for one that dies, another one shall live, for the one with the power to survive, to crush another's soul shall triumph. Harry would triumph; Harry would always triumph, for his power was unparalleled...

... All in all, it was not surprising that the first thing Harry did upon waking up was stagger into the bathroom and throw up. Afterwards, he collapsed on the cool bathroom floor and tried to catch his breath. He was covered in sweat and his scar was on fire, and he really, really wanted to forget his fucked-up nightmare and pretend that his subconscious had not come up with a bloodbath and a sacrificial altar and a horribly abused woman and the enjoyment that he'd felt from it all. When he was awake, Harry found absolutely no pleasure in the thought of other people's pain; he was not a sadist. And the idea of himself as spirit possessing a woman's womb, being born again as a

hideous talking infant and tearing the woman's insides apart in the process made him want to hurl again.

Harry would not be going back to sleep that night; in fact, he'd rather not venture too far away from the bathroom.

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Neville's hand trembled as he put the newspaper down and Harry sighed, feeling deeply unsettled too. Over the past few years, he had gotten so used to viewing the Daily Prophet as a highly dubious source, that when it reported a Death Eater march at the Quidditch World Cup, he had at first thought it a mistake. Or a hoax. Or a delusion – there had to be a lot of deluded people in the government for the likes of Malfoy's dad to have them wrapped around his finger. And yet, Harry had the odd gut feeling of something sinister stirring in the shadows; as if there was a puzzle being laid out and he was failing to decipher its design.

"Bet you're glad now that you're not at the Cup, though," Neville said in a transparent attempt at lightening the atmosphere.

Harry snorted. It did not sound particularly dignified – Nott's comments about decorum and purging your inner Muggle came to mind – but Harry didn't care. As a matter of fact, even if Dumbledore's fears did appear to be justified, he was still resentful over the old man's interference. He'd been really looking forward to the World Cup – and to hanging out with Blaise and Millie and Padma and – well. Dumbledore's letter had ever so politely urged him to decline any such offers for reasons of safety, a subtle or else behind his words. Harry had toyed with the idea of openly defying Dumbledore just for the sake of showing that he was not, despite whatever the Headmaster might think, his fan, ward, or pawn. However, Harry knew that he did not currently possess the resources to fight Dumbledore's meddling with – and if last year's confrontation with Sirius Black had taught him anything, it was to prepare for battle before you jumped into one.

Harry did enjoy ripping the missive into tiny little shreds, though, as he cursed his own prudence. Had he been a Gryffindor, he'd

wondered, would he have sent the blasted codger to hell? Hah. Had he been a Gryffindor, he'd probably worship the man. It was an affliction a lot of Gryffindors seemed to share.

"Harry?"

"Yeah?"

Neville waved his hand at the newspaper.

"I have a really bad feeling about this."

"I'm sure everyone has a bad feeling about this," Harry pointed out reasonably. "Well, except for the Death Eaters."

Neville frowned at him.

"You could be a little less flippant, you know. It's serious. If the Death Eaters are regrouping – "

" – They might start doing evil shit, yeah. Seems like they've begun already – juggling Muggles in the air? That's sick."

"Yes, it is," Neville agreed. "And just... please don't talk about Death Eaters lightly. It's not something you can joke about."

"Sorry." Harry sighed.

He supposed he and Neville had different coping mechanisms. With Neville, any mention of the Death Eaters or the last war would plunge him into a solemn mood – which was not a surprise, considering that his parents were confined to St. Mungo's as a result of some permanent injury inflicted by the Death Eaters. Harry was not clear in the details, but he knew that Neville went to see his parents sometimes and that their situation pained him greatly. Harry... well, he'd learnt that being open about your emotions would not necessarily bring you sympathy. Admitting to a sensitive topic in Slytherin was the same as inviting people to hit you where it hurt.



("Sirius Black was your parents' Secret Keeper, Potter. As soon as they performed the Charm, he went to the Dark Lord and spilled the beans. Then – whoops – your parents are dead. Very tragic. Don't you find?")

Of course, it helped if you could have the offender conveniently silenced by Parseltongue-activated furniture: even though the Slytherins were aware that Sirius Black was a painful subject for Harry, he had gone unmentioned ever since that incident with Malfoy. However, Harry was still uncomfortable just thinking back to that day because, hello, he'd nearly strangled a classmate – he'd really rather never have a repeat of that. Controlling his emotions and not letting them rule him was something Harry had resolved to work on ever since last June's confrontation with Sirius Black. He winced, just thinking of that encounter.

("One day, I'll hunt you down and kill you.")

God, just how melodramatic could he make himself sound? No wonder Sirius Black hadn't been impressed. Well, the whole thing with Black had been a mess anyway; the man was innocent of the crimes he'd been accused of, after all, so Harry's revengeful statements couldn't amount to much. Not that Harry felt Black was innocent. He knew it, intellectually – he'd believed Professor Lupin, because, in retrospect, Black's behaviour all throughout the year made much more sense if he'd been trying to kill Ron Weasley's rat and not Harry. Besides, there had been Peter Pettigrew's corpse to prove Black's claims. At the same time, though, Harry now wished he'd have requested to see that blasted corpse, because he had no image in his head to attach to the real murderer and instead only Sirius Black's deranged expression kept popping up. It did not make reconciling with the idea of Black's innocence any easier.

Besides, discovering that the man was innocent did not make Harry's defeat at his hands any less of a bitter pill to swallow. He didn't know whom he was angrier with, Black or himself, but it was a highly unpleasant memory, regardless. And... yeah, he was probably being immature about this, but he still hadn't told any of his friends about Black being guiltless. He should, really. And he would. Soon. However, telling them about it would involve bringing up Harry's

inability to defend himself when confronted by Black, and he wasn't ready to talk about it until he worked through it in his own mind. He could already imagine Hermione going, Didn't I tell you to study more, and Blaise making fun of his failure, and Millie's disdain.

Yeah, fine, it would be well deserved. Knowing it didn't mean he wanted to hear it from others in the immediate future.

And hey, at least he was striving to do better now; instead of sulking off, as he might have done last year, he channelled his frustration into the spells he practised in solitude for most of the day. It was great to be in a magical household: the Ministry could not detect who was performing magic, adult wizards or underage kids with the Trace on them. Harry took full advantage of that loophole to go through the book of rather nasty hexes that Blaise had sent him for his birthday. Harry had recognised straight from leafing through the book that Neville was not going to like the content – most spells seemed to be... questionable and certainly not on Hogwarts curriculum. Therefore, he had decided that what Neville didn't know couldn't hurt him, and disguised the cover as a monograph on the depiction of Animagi in Pushkin's Tale of Tsar Saltan. He'd spotted that book in the library at the Longbottom Manor and figured that, while Neville might find it strange that Harry was interested in such a title, at least he'd hardly open the book himself – so Harry's studies would fly under the radar.

Neville had, in the meantime, retreated to the greenhouses. By silent agreement, they'd both decided to give each other some space to digest the morning's news, as to avoid taking out their moods on one another.

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“Who wants to go first? You, Malfoy. We'll start with you. Your father's told you all about what it's like, hasn't he?” Moody gave a really unpleasant smile and watched with keen eyes, both normal and magical, for his target's reaction.

Malfoy was pale and almost shaking from anger; Nott wasn't in a much better state; Crabbe and Goyle were unperturbed only because

they lacked the basic brain capacity to process most of Moody's insinuations. And boy, there'd been a lot of insinuations. In their first Defence class with Moody two weeks ago, Harry had been amazed as he watched Moody tear into the kids with suspected Death Eater ties. Perhaps it should have been expected – Moody's reputation for hating Dark wizards was legendary and his arrival had caused quite a stir in Slytherin – but Harry had still not believed it would be quite this bad. And now, Moody was going to cast the Imperius Curse on all of them in turn, with Dumbledore's approval, and Harry was sure he wouldn't make it easy. Moody quite revelled in seeing Malfoy, in particular, taken down a peg.

This was like – being a Gryffindor in Snape's class, or something.

"Now, stand up, boy. Imperio!"

Harry cringed inwardly, watching Malfoy impersonate a ferret. This behaviour looked even worse when juxtaposed with Malfoy's perfectly groomed hair and neatly pressed robes. Pansy was biting her teeth in frustration as she watched; when her turn came, she was overcome by the urge to clean. For someone who had probably never dusted once in her life, she did a mean job cleaning the blackboard with her silken handkerchief. Blaise shot an extremely alarmed look at Harry when Moody had called for Zabini and then, eyes vacant, proceeded to dance a spirited jig. Tracey Davis followed right after with an attempt to fly, using her book bag as a magic carpet. Theodore Nott did cartwheels, while Daphne Greengrass recited some wizarding nursery rhymes. Well, at least everyone got to look like idiots together.

"Potter! Let's see how fare. Imperio!"

Immediately, Harry was filled with a nice, floating feeling. All his worries seemed to sink into the background; there was no need to trouble himself with thinking. Now, if he only listened to the friendly voice in his head that told him to sing the Hogwarts school song, everything would be absolutely perfect. Harry had already opened his mouth, ready to start, when he was stopped by a vague feeling that he did not, actually, want to sing right now. The voice got more insistent: sing, it demanded. However, the more Harry considered it, the less he felt like complying. The happy, careless feeling was

dissipating, too; he was getting the impression that not everything was entirely right with that voice. Suddenly, the pressure increased, and the voice's commands got uncompromising; unable in equal parts to obey and to resist, Harry ended up opening his mouth and croaking against his will about hoggy warty Hogwarts for a few moments.

Then the spell was lifted. The fog cleared immediately; Harry was left faintly disoriented and somewhat embarrassed.

"That's more like it!" Moody said, looking almost intrigued. "Potter fought the curse! Let's try again, then, laddie."

Moody kept casting the Imperius on Harry until Harry had finally managed to throw it off. It had not been a pleasant experience and he had a couple of bruises to prove it – aborting a movement mid-leap was never a good idea. Harry had also discovered that it was more difficult to resist the curse if it did not demand anything too outrageous from him. He'd had more trouble, for example, defying the command to simply sit down at his desk, than one to come up to Daphne Greengrass and declare his undying love for her. His subconscious knew full well that he didn't love Daphne Greengrass and did not want to confess to her; sitting down, on the other hand, didn't sound like a bad idea.

Being able to throw off the Imperius Curse was pretty damn neat, though.

Once the class ended, everyone filed out, a little subdued. Blaise and Millie exited with Harry, probing him for tips on resisting the Imperius. Daphne and Tracy smiled at Harry as they passed by; Malfoy, on the other hand, was still fuming. He walked next to Parkinson and Nott, conversing with them in hushed tones. Malfoy and Nott seemed to experience greater mutual understanding after Moody's classes than ever; normally, Nott, just like Greengrass and Davis, held back from joining either Harry or Malfoy's groups.

"Watch where you're going, Weasley!"

Harry turned from his conversation with Millie to see Malfoy snarling at Ron Weasley, who seemed nonplussed by the sudden attack. It figured – Malfoy would be looking for someone to take his anger out on, and who better than a conveniently available Weasley?

“I didn’t even do anything, you sleazeball!” Ron cried, affronted.

“You exist, Weasley, that’s more than enough.”

They were blocking the hallway. Well, Crabbe and Goyle were doing most of the blocking; Malfoy just sort of tried to loom over Ron Weasley. Of course, nobody of Harry’s classmates was going to intervene: Parkinson and Nott approved, Tracey and Daphne wouldn’t dare try to take Malfoy’s favourite chew toy away, and Blaise and Millie were clearly planning to let Harry handle it. Harry sighed.

“Does this have to happen here and now?” he interjected, coming to a stop near Malfoy. “Don’t take it wrong, Weasley, I’m charmed to see you – ”

“Yeah, well, I’d just rather you went and stuck your head in the toilet,” Ron replied, making a disgusted face.

“Too bad no one cares what you want, Weasley,” Malfoy sneered.

“Besides, you’re blocking the hallway, so I can’t exactly go anywhere,” Harry said. “So how about everyone gets moving?”

“I didn’t even start this!” Weasley sputtered indignantly. “Tell your friend Malfoy to stop being a jerk!”

With effort, Harry held back from snorting at the ridiculous suggestion that he and Malfoy were friends. They had the Slytherin public unity to blame for that misconception of Weasley’s part, but Harry hadn’t even explained the intricacies of Slytherin politics to Neville and Hermione, so he definitely wasn’t going to start reassuring Weasley. Apart from which, anyone with two eyes should have been able to see by now that Harry and Malfoy hung out with different groups of people, which was not exactly how best friends acted.

“ – waste of my time,” Malfoy concluded. Harry hadn’t caught the beginning, but figured he wasn’t missing much. “Vince, Greg, let’s go.”

Now that Malfoy had told his pet Neanderthals to stand down, traffic in the corridor resumed; Harry waved to Neville and Hermione as he walked past, hurrying to the next class.

“I’m so looking forward to seeing the Skrewts again, aren’t you?” Blaise said brightly.

“Oh yes,” Harry agreed. “They make my days worth living.”

“Do you think Warrington will actually try to enter the Triwizard Tournament?” Millie asked, changing the topic.

Harry shrugged.

“He said he might. I don’t speak to him much outside of Quidditch, and there’s none of that this year.”

“I’d rather support Warrington than Diggory,” Millicent said, scowling.

“Cedric isn’t bad.”

“He’s a Hufflepuff.”

“Millie, Harry’s made us hang out with a Mudblood,” Blaise uttered dramatically. “What makes you think he’ll draw the line at Hufflepuffs?”

What, indeed.

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Harry was looking at the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students in interest, wondering where they would sit. The Durmstrang lot seemed better adjusted to the Scottish weather than the Beauxbatons students in their silk uniforms – but then again, the Durmstrang arrivals were wearing fur. That had to be pretty damn warm. Harry’s

gaze kept wandering to a really tall and beautiful Beauxbatons girl with long blonde hair – he was quite sure he'd never seen anyone so attractive. She didn't seem too thrilled to be at Hogwarts, though; while the Durmstrang lot appeared impressed by the enchanted ceiling and golden dishes, the girl kept gossiping with her friends and wrinkling her nose in distaste.

Lost in his contemplation of the beautiful French girl, Harry had almost missed it when the Durmstrang students approached the Slytherin table, choosing to sit there.

"Hello. I am Draco Malfoy," Malfoy said, leaning over from his seat to extend a hand to Viktor Krum. The blond looked positively delighted to have the Durmstrang people at their table. "I hope you enjoy your stay at Hogwarts."

Harry observed in interest – from what he'd heard about Krum, he was an exceptional Seeker. He'd caught the Snitch at the Quidditch World Cup finals, too; had Harry gone, he would have seen Krum in action. Up close, the guy did not look handsome enough to justify the way girls all over the Hall were sighing over him – he had a large nose, thick eyebrows and a rather awkward manner to move, for someone reportedly fluid in the air.

"Hello," Krum replied, shaking Malfoy's hand. "I am Viktor Krum. It is very good to be at Hogwarts." He turned to look at Harry. "And you are Harry Potter?"

"Yes." Harry smiled at the expression on Malfoy's face – impotent fury mixed with jealousy. "It's nice to meet you too. I hadn't realised you were still at school, to be honest."

Krum nodded.

"Many people do not," he answered. Everything he said came out in a rather serious, gravelly voice, but Harry was pretty sure the accent was to blame for that. "I miss a lot of classes. At Durmstrang, they make special agreement for me."

The conversation then turned to how the Durmstrang students were going to keep studying while away from school, what they thought of Hogwarts and how they expected the Tournament to go. Overall, they seemed like a somewhat reserved lot, and Krum gave the impression of being a sensible guy. The way he remained utterly unimpressed with Malfoy's fawning earned him major bonus points with Harry – and besides, much like Harry himself, he did not seem to enjoy flaunting his fame.

Once everyone had eaten, Dumbledore got up and unveiled the impartial judge that would select the future Triwizard champions – the Goblet of Fire.

"Those students who wish to enter the Tournament should write their name on a slip of paper and put it into the Goblet, which will be active from now on and until tomorrow evening." Dumbledore made a pause as excited murmurs swept through the hall. "I implore you, however, to be very sure that you wish to enter, for there can be no chance for reconsideration once your name is selected. Furthermore, I shall draw an Age Line around the Goblet, so as to prevent anyone under the age of seventeen from circumventing the age restrictions."

Dumbledore seemed to be looking at the Weasley twins as he said that; Harry could see them conversing urgently at the Gryffindor table, probably thinking up ways to hoodwink the Age Line. At the Slytherin table, too, conversation became more agitated – the Durmstrang students talked to each other in a language Harry couldn't identify, while the discussion in English centred on who would put their names in and who could possibly become the Hogwarts champion. Malfoy, predictably, boasted that he could totally enter the Tournament if he wished to do so, only to be reminded of his place by Charles Warrington's supporters and Lavinia Yaxley's group of seventh years. Blaise went against popular opinion and called the Tournament an assisted suicide.

Harry wondered how on earth the Goblet would be able to determine, knowing only a person's name, whether they were good enough – never mind what it would read the names with. Magic worked in odd, odd ways, as the wizarding world never tired of reminding him.



Anyway, by this time tomorrow, the speculation would end – they'd know the names of all three champions.

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The fourth slip of paper flew out of the Goblet amid dead silence.

“Harry Potter,” Dumbledore read out, frowning – and the Hall hushed, and everyone stared at Harry, and Harry felt his smile for Cedric's success freeze on his face.

“Harry, go,” Millicent hissed in his ear.

So he went. Up between the tables of gossiping students, under the scrutiny of kids, teachers and guests. Even Hagrid wasn't smiling at him. Harry walked out of the Great Hall and into the small adjacent room completely on autopilot. He knew he had to keep moving; he knew he couldn't look weak; but damn if he wasn't feeling numb with shock. How could he possibly be another champion? There were meant to be three, as in Triwizard Tournament, not – Quatriwizard or whatever. And it was dangerous – only seventeen-year-olds were allowed to enter, what chances would Harry have?

And now he stood at the entrance to the champions' room, staring at Cedric Diggory, Fleur Delacour and Viktor Krum – the true champions. The ones who had, y'know, volunteered for this shit.

“Harry?” Cedric asked, concerned, and Harry shook himself inwardly. He needed to keep it together, here, if he wanted to get out of this somehow.

“Hey,” Harry said, trying out his voice for the first time since Dumbledore's announcement.

“What is it?” Fleur Delacour asked, flipping her hair back. For once, her beauty did not distract Harry. “Do zey want us back in ze Hall?”

“It's a bit more complicated,” Harry forced out.

"Vat – " Krum started, but he was interrupted by one of the Tournament officials bursting into the room.

"Extraordinary!" the tall heavyset man cried in evident excitement, grabbing Harry's arm. "Absolutely extraordinary!"

"Not extraordinary as much as illegal," Harry hissed, freeing himself.

"Illegal?" The man's eyes widened.

"I'm fourteen, in case you didn't know – this Tournament is for those over seventeen, so I can't possibly compete!"

"Compete?" the French girl repeated, frowning.

"Harry, what's going on?" Cedric asked, in his usual conciliatory manner, although he too sounded unnerved.

"What's going on is that my name came out of the bloody Goblet," Harry snapped, eyes trained on the Tournament official who'd begun looking somewhat uncomfortable under Harry's glare. "Will you maybe explain to me how that happened, Mr... whoever you are?"

"Ludo Bagman," the man went with answering the easier question, "Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports."

At that moment, the door from the Great Hall opened again to let in a new group of people: Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape, Durmstrang's Headmaster Karkaroff, Beauxbatons' Headmistress Madame Maxime, and a zombie-looking Ministry official. A shouting match between the adults ensued which would have been entertaining under other circumstances. Harry's input was only required once – to state that he had not put his name in the Goblet – but even that was perfunctory: none of these adults had really expected him to say yes. While Madame Maxime and Karkaroff were venting at a serene Dumbledore, Harry exchanged glances with Cedric.

"I'd say I'm sorry about this, except that I'm mostly mad," Harry said quietly.

"I take it you didn't put your name in the Goblet?" The older boy frowned.

Harry shot him a dirty look.

"Why the hell would I want to?"

"Because being a Triwizard champion is about the hottest thing you can be this year?"

Point.

"Hate to remind you, but I'm the Boy-Who-Lived. I don't need to look for ways to make myself even more exciting. Seriously – do I look like someone who wants to compete in this stupid Tournament?"

Cedric considered Harry carefully. He seemed to be genuinely trying to figure out whether Harry put his name in the Goblet, which made Harry feel a little sick – if Cedric, who'd known him a while, was not sure he could trust him, what would the rest of the school think?

"This is going to be the Heir of Slytherin all over again, isn't it," Harry muttered, resigned.

Cedric gave him a tight smile.

"We'll figure something out. And we'll certainly not let it get that far."

Harry glanced at Cedric – did this mean that Cedric believed him? – but their attention was diverted by Karkaroff finally posing a relevant question:

"Mr. Crouch, Mr. Bagman, as our – er – objective judges, you can tell us – surely, letting a fourth champion compete goes most grievously against the Tournament rules?"

Bagman wiped his forehead with a handkerchief and looked to the other man, Mr. Crouch, for assistance.

"The rules state clearly that those people whose names come out of the Goblet of Fire are bound to compete in the Tournament," Crouch intoned.

Harry's heart plummeted.

"I didn't sign up for this," he said firmly and loudly, attracting everyone's notice for the first time. "There's no way you can force me to compete."

"Mr. Potter – "

"Look, it's not fair to me, it's not fair to Cedric, and it's not fair to Durmstrang and Beauxbatons! Everyone will be better off if you don't include me in this – "

"Ze boy is right," Madame Maxime acknowledged from her impressive height.

"I demand that the Goblet is taken out again and my students are allowed to re-submit their names," Karkaroff insisted. "If the Potter boy gets to participate, my school should get two champions as well – "

"I've just said I'm not going to compete!"

"I'm afraid you must, Harry," Dumbledore said solemnly. "From the moment your name came out of the Goblet of Fire, you have entered into a magically binding contract – "

"Oh really? Thanks, that's hugely reassuring – "

"Potter!" Snape growled. "Enough of your cheek."

Harry rolled his eyes. Dumbledore sent him a reproachful glance – but, really, what had he been expecting?

"This is ridiculous," Karkaroff hissed. "I have half a mind to leave now!"

“Empty threat, Karkaroff,” Moody’s voice said from the doorway.

Harry noticed the way the Durmstrang Headmaster tensed up at once. Snape, too, seemed quite uncomfortable in Moody’s presence.

Moody then proceeded to unveil his accusation that someone was trying to endanger Harry by forcing him to participate in the Tournament. It was all a bit too much to process at the moment, but Harry filed the idea away for later consideration.

“Well, I say we give the champions their instructions for the First Task!” Ludo Bagman cried jovially, rubbing his palms together. It was as if this situation didn’t faze the guy at all. “Barty, want to do the honours?”

Harry listened as the aloof Ministry official, Barty Crouch, related the rules for the First Task. Fighting the unknown didn’t seem like a good idea to Harry, so he resolved to find out as much as possible about the challenge in advance. People started leaving soon after Crouch was done; Fleur Delacour went off with Madame Maxime and Krum with Karkaroff, all of them looking highly dissatisfied still. Dumbledore had only had time to say: “Harry, Cedric, I suggest that you go up to bed,” before Professor Snape interrupted him:

“Actually, I want Potter to come with me.”

Snape looked well and truly furious. His dark eyes glittered with anger and his lips were opened in a half-snarl, revealing an uneven row of yellowing teeth; all in all, he looked rather frightening, in a rabid-beast-out-of-control sort of way.

“Of course, Severus,” Dumbledore replied. “Good night, Harry.”

Harry threw a dark glance at Dumbledore – who had the nerve to smile at him in a grandfatherly fashion that was actually quite creepy – and nodded to Cedric in farewell.

Bye, Cedric. It was nice knowing you. Too bad my Head of House is about to kill me dead.

Professor Snape had, however, waited until his office to start on Harry.

“Now, Potter. Do enlighten me: what on earth possessed you to put your name in the Goblet of Fire?”

Harry frowned, refusing to flinch away from the Professor’s heavy glare.

“I didn’t put it in.”

Snape’s eyes bore into Harry’s relentlessly, as if the man expected to dig the truth out of Harry’s skull that way.

“I didn’t put my name in the Goblet.”

More of that accusing, penetrating stare.

“I honestly didn’t! Why would I want to, I don’t know enough to compete, I’m just beginning my fourth year, I know I can’t do this – ”

He was not having a breakdown in front of Snape. He was not doing this right now. Not here.

Harry averted his eyes and took a few deep breaths. The disgusting-looking something in jars on the shelves of Snape’s office did not make him feel at all better.

When he glanced back at his Head of House, the man was surveying him with a frown.

“Very well, Potter. Perhaps you did not put your name in the Goblet.”

Harry didn’t think he was successful in concealing his amazement, but at least he’d managed not to gape. Did Snape, the man who’d always really disliked him, just say that he believed Harry?

“However,” and here the Potions Master’s look turned menacing once again, “this means that somebody else had submitted your name, probably under a fourth school, making sure that you would be

selected. Now, this might be a case of hero-worship for the Boy-Who-Lived,” Snape’s lip curled in a sneer, “or that paranoid maniac Moody might be right. It is possible that someone entered your name in full awareness that you cannot be expected to compete based on your current skills. Does that bode well for you, Potter?”

Harry’s mouth was dry.

“No, sir.”

“Indeed. The Triwizard Tournament is not as dangerous as it used to be in the bygone days, but accidents can still happen. Especially since none of the tasks are to be conducted in a particularly controlled environment. Do you understand what I’m telling you, Potter?”

That I’m toast.

“I have to be careful, sir.”

“You have to be more than careful, you imbecile. Someone in this school possibly wishes you enough harm to guarantee that you risk your life thrice before the school year is over. Be on guard at all times, Potter – or else be prepared to suffer the consequences.”

Harry nodded, dully gazing at the stone floor of Snape’s office. If Snape of all people was warning him, the situation had to be pretty dire indeed.

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When Harry returned to the Slytherin Common Room, he was greeted with an atmosphere that was positively jubilant. A great many students were milling about, gossiping excitedly and drinking butterbeer; a large poster of a roaring snake swallowing a cup labelled as Triwizard was displayed on one of the walls. The mood and the décor left no doubt as to the fact that most of the House was quite enthusiastic about one of their own participating in the Tournament. The younger kids appeared to be particularly thrilled, while some of the older students sulked around the corners of the

room, watching the celebration disapprovingly. Malfoy was, predictably, one of them, but he and Warrington were the only members of Quidditch team who did not come up to Harry once he'd entered.

("Didn't know you had it in you, Potter – good job, so how did you get past the Age Line?")

Harry tried to protest that he hadn't put his name into the Goblet, but all he got in return were winks and meaningful looks. They accepted his denial as a perfunctory attempt to maintain his innocence and avoid getting in trouble; in this regard, they hadn't really expected him to confess. Still, the Slytherins did not seem to entertain, even for a moment, the idea that Harry had not entered himself into the Tournament. Most seemed to approve; some did not. Charles Warrington was nursing his injured pride – a measly fourth year managed to get into the Tournament where he'd failed. A popular seventh year girl Lavinia Yaxley had sneered and said that Harry was bound to get crushed in the Tournament and bring disgrace to Slytherin. Malfoy sided with her, insofar as she let him, but mostly just vented his anger at anyone who would listen. On the other hand, influential sixth years Miles Bletchley, Edward Montague and a few of their friends – both from the Quidditch team and beyond – had chosen to support Harry and offered their help in making sure that he'd do well in the Tournament.

("Cause you might have been able to get yourself into the Tournament, but there's no way you're good enough for those Tasks, so don't get a big head.")

Harry could not put into words how far he was from getting a big head about this. The offer of help surprised him greatly; fair enough, the Quidditch guys had sometimes taught him a spell or two here and there, but they'd never taken a real interest in him. He'd be almost touched, if he hadn't known that they were only offering to make sure that the Slytherin champion wouldn't suffer a humiliating loss. Whatever their motivations, though, Harry wasn't going to refuse. Well, his initial reflex had been to say no, thanks, because he'd always tried to deal with his problems by himself – but doing so would be really stupid, here. Harry knew he wasn't skilled enough yet and



hadn't he decided, last year, that he'd try his best to get better? Here was the perfect opportunity; if not for the Triwizard Tournament, the older Slytherins would never have deigned to share their knowledge with him. With their help, he might not only survive the Tournament, but also go a long way to becoming stronger.

There's the silver lining he'd been looking for.

It took Harry a while to get through the throng of students surrounding him and make his way to his couch, where Blaise and Millie were waiting patiently.

"And he returns!" Blaise cried, feigning a fainting fit. "The sun is shining so brightly out of your arse, I can hardly look at your brilliant self!"

"Then don't," Harry advised, wondering what this greeting meant, exactly.

It was always hard to tell with Blaise when he was genuinely angry; he had perfected passive aggression into an art form.

"Mind explaining yourself?" Millie snapped, narrowing her eyes. "I didn't think you wanted to participate in the Tournament."

"I don't," Harry said, ire rising again. "I have no idea how my name ended up in that stupid Goblet."

"Shhh," the upholstery snakes hissed comfortingly, as he sat down on the couch.

"Of course you don't want to compete," Blaise agreed. "You've never seemed suicidal to me."

Harry frowned at him; he was too wound up for word games.

"Does this mean you believe that I didn't put my name in the Goblet?" he asked bluntly.

"I'll believe anything you say, Harry," Blaise said, putting a hand over his heart.

Millie whacked Blaise on the head with a pillow, disregarding the indignant hisses from the snakes. Then again, she didn't know what they were calling her, exactly.

"Stop being such a clown," she demanded. "This is a serious situation. Harry, do you have to compete even if you don't want to?"

"Dumbledore said it's a magically binding contract." Harry scowled. "Whatever that means." A thought suddenly occurred to him. "Wait a second, I'll be right back."

Harry walked swiftly back to the group of sixth year boys, who were now laughing together about something.

"Pucey?" he asked. "Can I talk to you for a moment?"

Adrian Pucey raised his eyebrows questioningly, but assented and stepped away from the others to speak with Harry.

"What do you want, Potter?"

"Your father works in law, right?"

"Yeah, so?"

"Do you happen to know anything about binding magical contracts?"

"Getting cold feet about the Tournament already, Potter?" Pucey asked with a smirk.

"So you know it's a binding contract," Harry pressed, ignoring the gibe.

Finding out more about magical law was his primary concern right now. Maybe there was a way to get out of the Tournament or get disqualified or something? He'd research it, of course, but it would be good to get at least basic information on it as soon as possible.

Pucey shrugged.

“Magical contracts are pretty straightforward, actually. What do you already know?”

Harry shook his head, indicating his complete and utter lack of expertise on the subject. He’d never needed to worry about magical contracts before.

“Right,” Pucey sighed and sat down on an armrest of the couch they were convening by. “Long story short: there are two types of contracts. One you can choose to break, the other you can’t. The toughest example of the one you can break is the Unbreakable Vow –

“Er, isn’t it called – ”

“Unbreakable, yeah, but the name’s ironic, because you can fail to fulfil the requirement and then you’re dead. See what I mean? There are minor contracts like this – you promise to return five Galleons, or if not, you’ll get warts. That sort of thing. So you have a threat hanging over you, but you can choose to back out and suffer the consequences. With me so far?”

“Yeah,” Harry said.

“Now, the contracts you can’t break actually influence your actions. You will not break them because it’s impossible. Signing the Scroll of Secrecy, putting your name in the Goblet of Fire, stuff like that – these contracts won’t let you break them and that’s that.”

“Not let me – how?” Harry asked. He didn’t think it sounded very good at all.

Pucey waved an impatient hand.

“I don’t know how it works, but their magic – the magic of the Goblet – will make you participate.”

“Like the Imperius?” Harry clarified, because it sounded a lot like mind-control to him.

“No,” Pucey replied, looking scandalised. “Of course not. It’s just a restriction on your actions and, remember, it’s assumed that you agree to this when you put your name in the Goblet. You decide to participate – the Goblet only makes sure you don’t chicken out when things get rough.”

“In that case, why do I feel like not participating right now?” Harry challenged. “I don’t want to compete at all – ”

“Didn’t you just make plans to train up for the Tournament?” Pucey asked rhetorically. “You won’t get out of this, Potter – deal with it. You should have asked these questions before you put your name in the Goblet.”

Harry clenched his fists angrily; for the millionth time, he did not choose this!

“Wait a second,” he said, suddenly wondering. “How is a magical contract formed? I mean, imagine for a moment that I did not put my name in the Goblet – ”

“You have to have written your name,” Pucey stated firmly. “Your name written by your own hand is in a lot of contracts. Names are important, you know.”

Harry was thinking furiously. If he hadn’t written his name, and nobody else but him could have done it –

“Did my name have to be written for putting it into the Goblet?” he asked. “I mean, could it have been my name torn from a piece of homework or something?”

Pucey looked at him in interest.

“That’s actually a good question,” he mused. “I mean, normally, if a contract requires signing, you know what you are signing and why. With the Goblet, you’re just throwing random pieces of paper with your name in... I’d have to ask my dad, but it sounds doable.”

“Can you ask him, please?” Harry said. “I’d really appreciate it.”

With a nod, Pucey got up and then regarded him seriously for a moment.

“I still think that you’re digging for information so that you’d have an alibi, but – if someone did actually submit your name for you, then it’s a pretty shitty situation you’re in, Potter.”

No, really? And here Harry was wondering where this strange sinking feeling was coming from.

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Over the next couple of days, Harry had had to face the fact that not everyone would be convinced that he hadn’t wanted to participate in the Tournament. A significant part of the school had turned against him – people threw insults at him in the corridors, openly expressed the hope that he would fail ignominiously, and a couple of particularly irate Gryffindors had even tried to hex him. Harry wouldn’t have found it so annoying if he’d actually entered the Tournament willingly, but as it was, the unfairness rankled. However, after a couple of days of seething with rage and having had a conversation with Millicent about being so cute for expecting everyone to be fair, Harry chose to try and control open outbreaks of his anger. Oh, he was still pissed off as hell, but Millie was right at least in one thing - he was making himself an easier target by showing how people's comments got to him. He needed to cultivate a calm, unruffled facade in the face of adversity.

Well. This would be good practice for that temper control he'd been planning to exercise - although the decision to learn to control his emotions had been much easier to make when he didn't have this shit to deal with.

Honestly, though, the situation was not as bad as he had expected it to be. At least now, only a part of the school turned against him, unlike the way he’d become persona non grata for most people back in second year. Seeing the way he and Cedric had remained friendly, a lot of people accepted the idea of two champions rather peacefully. A good many Hufflepuffs, of course, felt resentful that Harry was

stealing the glory their House so rarely received, but Cedric had enough influence – especially now – to keep the most avid Harry-haters from going on an all-out crusade. Harry had been worried about the twins' reaction, but they had taken it pretty much for granted that if they couldn't get into the tournament, then Harry certainly wouldn't have the skills. Besides, they seemed preoccupied with something else these days.

And currently, Harry sat at a table in the Library, having just finished telling everything to the rest of his friends, and waited for their response. Neville and Padma had accepted him at his word without hesitation – he could see it written on their faces. Hermione, Terry and Anthony seemed to be mulling over his explanation still.

"Well," Hermione said, speaking in a tone that was suitably quiet for the Library, "if you didn't put your name in the Goblet, who did?"

"And why?" Terry added, not bothering to keep his voice down, since Madam Pince was not there to frown at them.

"That's the question." Harry nodded darkly. He'd spent a lot of time wondering what fucked-up bastard had put his name in the Goblet. "I've looked it up, I can't get out of participating in the Tournament," Anthony nodded at this; he must have researched it too, "but I want to find whoever is responsible for sticking me into this position. And do something to them that will involve great amounts of pain."

"I'll help you," Neville volunteered. "I'm not sure about the pain part, but I think we should find out who put your name in the Goblet."

"Yes," Hermione said pensively, "I agree that we should try to find out who put Harry's life at such risk."

"It's going to be great!" Padma clapped her hands, beaming. "Just like our own murder mystery. I love those."

"I'd prefer if you enjoyed them at someone else's expense," Harry muttered.

"Schadenfreude," Anthony said.

“Bless you.”

“Never mind.” Anthony sighed. “So who could have done it?”

“Or had the motive?” Terry added.

The six of them spent the next hour going through all possible suspects in the crime. The only fact they knew for certain was that the culprit was over seventeen years of age. There were also minor requirements – being strong enough to Confund the Goblet and having access to Harry’s homework – but these were really difficult to measure. Who knew how strong any average student was? And homework could be easily stolen – it’s not like Harry could account where each and every one of his submitted works had gone. Some he still retained, others he’d trashed, or lost... As it was, all teachers, all Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students present, all seventh years, some sixth years and two Ministry officials fit the culprit’s profile.

“I’m glad we’ve narrowed it down so much,” Harry said.

An exhausting debate ensued. Hermione maintained that, even apart from the fact that suspecting the Professors was ludicrous, they had all taught Harry for years and had had numerous opportunities to depose of him in a less convoluted way. Padma countered that it could hardly be someone from Durmstrang or Beauxbatons, because why would they give Hogwarts two champions? Anthony interrupted their squabble with the statement that the culprit could technically be absolutely anyone with a grudge against Harry – or a desire to see the Boy-Who-Lived among Hogwarts champions.

“So there are two major motives,” Terry concluded, sitting up straighter in his chair. “We can see which motive fits whom.”

All Hogwarts teachers and most students might have wanted Harry to be the second champion. Anyone at all might have wished to do Harry in for their personal reasons. In the end, there remained five people who seemed to have less of a motive than everyone else: Igor Karkaroff, Madame Maxime, Professor Moody, Ludo Bagman and Mr. Crouch. The latter two were impartial observers, making no profit

whatsoever from Hogwarts having an extra champion – if anything, it caused an international scandal for the Ministry. Moody had once mentioned that he was at Hogwarts this year as a personal favour to Dumbledore, to keep an eye on things, and Harry being put in danger ran counter to his goals. Karkaroff and Madame Maxime were negatively impacted by Harry becoming an extra Hogwarts champion.

“Wonderful!” Padma said, writing their names down. “We have our suspects.”

Hermione stared at her, aghast.

“We’ve just decided that they have no reason to put Harry’s name in the Goblet!”

“Precisely,” Padma agreed. “It means they must be involved.”

“How is this logical?” Hermione demanded. “Life is not a murder mystery novel, the one who is least suspicious is not necessarily the one guilty – ”

Harry exchanged glances with Terry and Anthony. Last time Anthony had braved breaking up their argument; who would be the next courageous soul? Terry shook his head frantically. Harry sighed.

“Well,” he said loudly, “there is no harm in trying to research these people. It gives us a nice place to start, since there’re only five of them.”

“And six of us,” Terry continued supportively.

“I’ll tell the others, too,” Harry said, thinking of Blaise, Millie and the twins.

By the end of the conversation, Harry was somehow more optimistic about his prospects. This was something he could do. With the help of his friends, he would find the bastard who had put his name in the Goblet and discover why they had done it. This and the training he’d arranged for with the sixth year Slytherins made Harry feel that he



had wrenched some control over his life back from the thrice-damned Goblet of Fire – and that was a highly welcome development.

isclaimer: there are things I own and things I don't. Harry Potter is in the latter category.

A/N: A huge thank you to Gwendolyn. Words fail me as I try to describe your greatness.

In this chapter, it matters more than ever that Harry is an unreliable narrator. There is a chance that you will know what is going on better than he does – or you could, of course, be just as bamboozled. Huh. Bamboozled. I like that word. Anyway, while we're on the subject of words, I ritually warn for swearing.

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Harry shelved the heavy book he'd been perusing and winced as the careless move resonated with pain in his left side. He'd already spent an hour in the Restricted Section of the Library tonight – and wasn't it freaky with various books moaning in the dark and the castle's uncharacteristic silence pressing down upon Harry from all sides – and he was getting ready to return to the dorms. He'd found a few useful things, after all: the spell that had hurt him today was, apparently, known as the Bludgeoning Curse – which would explain why it felt as if Harry had had a Bludger ram into his ribs at full speed. Reputedly, it was more effective if fired several times in rapid sequence – Harry was thankful that Bletchley and Montague hadn't tried that. Next time, perhaps.

("Be more observant! Why did you dodge there? Didn't you see the curse coming? There's two of us, Potter, you'll get hit until you learn to fucking watch the duel properly!")

Two weeks in, and Harry's training with the sixth year Slytherins was turning out to be quite different from what he had expected. He'd thought they'd teach him like Defence Professors normally did: show him a spell, make him practice, give advice. In retrospect, he should have known it wouldn't be so easy. They didn't say: I shall now cast Vexo on you, which will toss you violently to the ground. Instead, they simply cast it and Harry either blocked, or dodged, or ended up hurt. The sixth year Slytherins had no compunction about landing him in the Hospital Wing, if that made him learn his lesson – the dislocated

shoulder Madam Pomfrey had mended last weekend was testament to that. Later, Harry would trudge to the Library and look up the curses they had thrown at him, going by the incantations he remembered. Occasionally, he happened across other interesting spells in the books he was checking, which he would later try out on his tutors – like *Morsus Apis*, which produced an illusion of attack by invisible bees. The training, while not conventional, was effective in its own way – it forced Harry to spend a lot of time studying for fear of serious physical injury.

He just really, really hoped that all of this would somehow help him pass the First Task, because he still had no idea what it would be, and it was making him quite nervous. Some people said that any practice of magic would serve to make one better at magic in general; well, Harry hoped that it was true, because otherwise he was well and truly fucked.

This was Harry's first nighttime outing to the Restricted Section – it was taking academic zeal a bit far, perhaps, and he felt hugely uncool sneaking out after curfew for going to the Library, but apparently Bletchely and Montague were fond of curses from a riskier repertoire. Besides, Harry was plagued by nightmares, in all of which he failed at the First Task horribly, and research distracted him from miserable thoughts. Harry would not have dared go, anyway, if not for his Invisibility Cloak and the nifty little map the Weasley twins had given him a couple of days ago. At first he'd been confused as to why Fred and George seemed to think that a blank piece of parchment would somehow help him investigate who'd put his name in the Goblet. He was quick to retract that opinion, however, once he'd seen what the parchment could do – show the names and locations of everyone at Hogwarts and passwords for secret passageways besides. A lot of the twins' past deeds suddenly seemed more feasible, if the mysterious Marauders had been helping them.

("It is with great anguish that we entrust you with our most valuable weapon – but your need is greater than ours. Smite your enemies, Harrykins. Do us proud.")

The Weasley twins had found him by the lake after the Daily Prophet photo shoot and said that, since it was Harry's investigation, he'd

better have the Map and monitor it himself – and further volunteered to look into Ludo Bagman with eagerness that was somewhat puzzling, though not unwelcome. The investigation needed all the resources they could get, because, so far, it wasn't really getting anywhere. Two weeks had passed since the meeting at the Library, but they were still at square one. During the Weighing of the Wands, Harry had tried to discover through Fleur and Krum what their Heads of school were thinking, but ended up dragged into an argument on whether or not Hogwarts had cheated. On that same occasion, he'd managed to get on the wrong side of a blonde reporter woman by refusing to give her an interview. That had been a purely automatic defensive reaction on Harry's part, but the blonde woman in eye-gougingly bright robes seemed to take it personally.

("My name, Mr. Potter, is Rita Skeeter. And I expect you will come to fear it, in time.")

Harry was pretty sure he'd be seeing something highly uncomplimentary about himself in the next edition of the Prophet.

Until then, though, he needed to make it back to the dorms in one piece tonight and not get caught by anyone on the way. Harry opened up the Marauder's Map and scanned the corridors to check that the coast was clear. Nobody was patrolling the upper floors right now; Snape was stalking through the dungeons, which might become a problem once Harry got there, and Filch was by the Trophy Room. Harry was already about to sigh in relief when an odd name caught his attention: Bartemius Crouch.

Bartemius Crouch was climbing up the staircase Harry normally chose when walking from the dungeons – and Bartemius Crouch had absolutely no business creeping about the castle at night. Mr. Crouch was supposed to have left after the Weighing of the Wands. What was he doing here now?

Harry donned his Invisibility Cloak, heart beating fast in excitement. It was time to do some sleuthing.

He exited the Library, keeping an eye on the Map, and stole along the hallway, trying to make as little noise as possible. The portraits in the

dark corridor snoozed quietly in their frames. Somewhere outside, an owl gave a long, piercing hoot.

“Shit,” Harry hissed as his foot tripped over something and he stumbled, catching his balance at the last moment. It had sounded as if a young elephant had just decided to take a stroll around here; miraculously, though, the portraits remained asleep.

Right. Less excitement, more caution. Harry shook his head at his own rashness as he applied the Silencing Charm to his shoes, and glanced behind him. Apparently, the object he’d tripped over had been the foot of Boris the Bewildered; Boris, being a statue, did not seem to be aware.

Harry continued onward, paying more attention to his surroundings now.

He reached the staircase without further incident and checked the Map: Bartemius Crouch was still climbing up, seemingly aiming for the seventh floor. Harry rushed after him, taking two steps at a time.

Hogwarts was eerily quiet; only the soft creaking of stones against each other disturbed the silence of the night. It was as if the castle was sighing in its sleep.

Harry reached the seventh floor and checked again; apparently, Crouch was still walking along the corridor. Harry would catch up to him soon.

He got off the stairs and was about to turn the corner, when –

“BOOOOOOOO!”

Peeves, bright clothes visible even in the dark, whooshed towards Harry. Harry dove out of the way, escaping collision by a hair’s breadth, and took cover behind a statue of a tall wizard in knightly attire. A portrait of an old lady woke up with a startled shriek, which elicited bright, malicious laughter from Peeves as he sped past Harry’s hideout and down under the arch of the stairway.

Harry remained motionless, listening for footsteps; would Crouch be coming back to check on the disturbance?

Moments passed; Harry's breath evened; however, the only sounds he heard were the portrait's annoyed grumbings about inconsiderate poltergeists and disrespect for old age. He deemed it safe to continue.

Harry walked swiftly in the direction where, according to the Map, the dot labelled "Bartemius Crouch" had slowed its stride. Afraid to miss Crouch reaching his destination, whatever it might be, Harry broke into a run. In a few moments, he came to a halt at the corner behind which, in the next stretch of the hallway, stood Mr. Crouch.

Harry peeked around the corner cautiously.

He could not actually see much, but that wasn't important since he knew that the dark silhouette in black robes belonged to Mr. Crouch. The shadowy figure stopped before a blank wall. Then, it started pacing; Harry had counted the man walking before the wall three times when, suddenly, a door materialised where solid stones had been.

Crouch entered the doorway and disappeared from sight. Moments before it, Harry had caught a glimpse of a sack the man was holding in his hand.

Harry leaned against the wall, chewing at his lip. This was all really quite bizarre. Why would a senior Ministry official secretly open odd passageways at Hogwarts at night?

Harry waited for a bit to see whether Crouch would re-emerge, but he stayed wherever he had gone. Harry decided to venture closer.

The door had, in the meanwhile, disappeared again.

Harry touched the wall cautiously; it seemed to be just the same as any ordinary castle wall, but then, magic was great at disguising means of getting around: Portkeys were masked as Muggle rubbish, the Knight Bus was invisible to Muggles, the Diagon Alley entrance was only available to those in the know...

Harry looked around for anything that would distinguish this spot and make it easier to find again in the future; right now, it was too dangerous to hang around here, but he would definitely return at a later date. The tapestry on the opposite wall caught his attention: it depicted a wizard and several trolls in frilly tutus. Harry stared, taken aback by the display, and glanced at the name given on the plaque: Barnabas the Barmy. Well, that was memorable, at least.

Hopefully, if he could enter that room, he'd be able to figure out what Mr. Crouch was doing there and why he found it necessary to sneak into Hogwarts in the middle of the night to do it.

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"Okay, so – we have to walk past this wall three times and a door will appear?" Neville asked dubiously.

"That's the idea," Harry said.

They were standing in the seventh floor corridor, opposite the tapestry with ballet-dancing trolls. The hallway was quite empty, since it was dinnertime now; Neville had agreed to miss the meal with Harry in favour of trying to find the secret room Crouch had used yesterday. Harry was sure Padma, too, would have jumped at the chance to have an adventure, but he hadn't seen her yet – he'd had no classes with Ravenclaws today. Blaise had shown only mild interest in the matter, while Millie had been sceptical of the endeavour – or, rather, of its timing.

("Are you sure you aren't missing dinner because you're afraid of showing up in public after Skeeter's article?")

Harry grimaced. Well, yeah, he wasn't at all averse to waiting until things blew over a bit – but, honestly, it was all in the name of not provoking his temper too much. If he had been faced with hostility before Rita Skeeter's article, it sure got worse since she'd published her gothic tale of bullshit today, and even Cedric's influence could do little to curb it. Harry was painted as a secretive Slytherin, a shameless attention-seeker, a Parselmouth who had likely

hoodwinked the Goblet through Dark magic... Skeeter had even managed to ask for Lockhart's opinion – and the man obliged her by assuring the Daily Prophet that he'd always found Harry much too eager for fame. And now, Harry was sorely tempted to curse the living lights out of any and all students who insulted him – but he'd just be playing into Rita's hands and souring his own reputation if he did that.

No. It was best to avoid unnecessary contact with the rest of humanity tonight.

"Right." Harry started pacing in front of the wall, the way Crouch had done yesterday. "I hope this works..."

However, despite the fact that Harry had walked past the wall three times, it remained unresponsive.

"What am I doing wrong?" he inquired.

The stones stayed silent. Neville's attempt hadn't been any more successful.

"Maybe there's a special stone we need to step on," Harry suggested, changing places with Neville again.

Barnabas the Barmy and his trolls had abandoned attempts at ballet and watched Harry and Neville in interest. The trolls sniggered at their continued failure. Harry glared.

"You need to think of a place, dear boy," Barnabas the Barmy said in a wheezing voice.

"What place?" Harry asked, frowning.

"The one where you want to go, naturally," the wizard answered, but that was the end of their conversation, because the trolls got bored again and resumed their attempts to hit Barnabas with their clubs.

Harry and Neville exchanged glances. Neville shrugged.



“It’s worth a shot.”

Harry paced again, concentrating on his desire to see the room Mr. Crouch had summoned yesterday.

“Maybe it needs to be a particular place,” Neville suggested, when it became clear that no door would be forthcoming. “Like, maybe you need to know exactly what you want to see. Let me try.”

Neville wandered to and fro before the wall, face scrunched up in concentration, and then, suddenly –

“Hey, I think you’ve done it!” Harry exclaimed.

Indeed, a door had materialised where blank wall had been. Congratulating each other profusely, Harry and Neville rushed to open it, to see –

“Your greenhouse?” Harry asked, nonplussed.

“Er, it was the first place I’d thought of,” Neville said. He beamed again. “It worked, though! It looks exactly like my greenhouse – look, even my honking daffodils are here! And my flutterbloom! Wait – how is this possible?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said, intrigued. “Is it really identical to your greenhouse?”

Neville nodded vigorously.

“Yep. Do you think this place can become absolutely anything? Hey, how about you show me the Slytherin Common Room?”

They stepped out of the room and waited for the door to disappear again; then it was Harry’s turn to pace. He focused on the image of the Common Room.

“Look!” Neville cried. “It’s there, it worked! Let’s check. Is it the same?”

Harry stared around the room in amazement. It was as if the Slytherin Common Room had moved to the seventh floor; even details Harry wouldn't have consciously remembered were present, like the intricacies of decoration.

"Yeah," he said, still stunned. "It's the same."

"Er, not the most cheerful place, is it?" Neville ventured, looking around warily. "Quite... dark, and all."

"Don't know, I like it." Harry shrugged.

"Me too," said a serene voice from behind them.

Harry whirled around to see a blonde girl with long hair and odd, protuberant blue eyes; there was a Ravenclaw crest on her robes.

"I like it that it's so green," the girl went on to explain. "If you don't mind me looking?"

Visibly perplexed, Neville moved aside and let her pass through the doorway.

"Wait a second," Harry said, closing the door. "What are you doing here? Were you spying on us?"

The girl's large eyes opened even wider.

"Oh, no, I was simply passing by, but it is very interesting that you made a room appear out of nowhere. Do you do it often? It must be very useful."

"Sorry," Neville said, "but who are you?"

"I'm Luna." She absently fingered her pinecone necklace, peering further into the room. "Luna Lovegood."

"Nice to meet you," Neville replied, clearly on autopilot. "I'm Neville Longbottom and that's –"

"Harry Potter, yes." Luna nodded gravely. "The Quibbler did a feature on you last month. Is it true that you used to sing in Beijing opera until you were nine?"

"I – what?" Harry choked on his next breath and stared at the girl.

Neville snorted a laugh.

"Acting is an honourable profession," Luna said approvingly. "Don't be afraid to confess to it. And you can make doors appear, that is very good – "

"Luna, I've never even been to Beijing opera and I don't make doors appear, okay?" Harry cut in, exasperated. "So please don't go around telling people these things." There were enough rumours circulating about Harry as it was. "And this place is supposed to be a secret."

Luna turned to look at him in interest.

"Really? From whom?"

"From everyone," Harry said.

"Why?"

"Because we're secretly investigating – " Neville began.

"That's a secret, too, Nev!" Harry reminded him hurriedly.

"Oh... right," Neville murmured, biting his lip.

"Don't worry," Luna said seriously. "I will not turn you in. I don't believe the bad things people say about you."

"Because he used to sing in Beijing opera?" Neville inquired, grinning.

"I have never sung in Beijing opera!"

"No, but people say bad things about me too," Luna said calmly. She completely shattered the fleeting semblance of normality, however,

as she continued: “Besides, it is obvious to anyone that the Goblet ceremony had been the initiation of the Rotfang conspiracy.”

Harry stared.

“That’s... good,” he said, at last. This Luna girl was barmier than Barnabas, but, hopefully, one could negotiate with her. “How about we make a deal? We tell you about this room and you don’t tell anyone about it.”

Luna appeared to think it over.

“So it will be our secret?”

“Exactly,” Harry agreed. “It will be our secret.”

Luna beamed and clapped her hands.

“Wonderful! I’ve always wanted to have a secret with somebody. It’s almost like having friends!”

“Er – right.” What did one say to that? Harry glanced at Neville, but the other boy remained silent; he seemed less amused now and his smile had turned sympathetic.

The following discussion had revealed that Luna had actually come across this room once before; it had looked very different then and in it, Luna had found things her classmates had hidden from her. Harry had not liked the sound of that – it seemed that not only was Luna odd enough to not have made many friends, but some people were actually bullying her. Harry had always held great distaste for bullying – it came with having been bullied for years on end – and he knew that Neville felt the same. Even though Harry still thought that Luna was completely crazy, she did not deserve to be picked on for being different; Harry resolved to talk to his Ravenclaw friends about this.

Besides, the girl was quite harmless – and, on second thought, rather entertaining with her wild, off-the-wall notions. For a while there, Harry had almost forgotten to worry about the looming First Task.

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A week later, Harry, Blaise, Hermione and Padma sat in the Hidden Room, as they'd termed the place Harry had discovered. It proved to be infinitely more convenient for holding secret meetings than the Library, where they were always in danger of being overheard – and the Hidden Room had the added advantage of providing really comfortable seating arrangements. Apparently, it could also produce places that did not exist in reality – Padma had simply requested a good place for holding a meeting, and the Room had obligingly presented them with nice beige couches, a few low tables to put their notes on, and even a window, which had to be fake, but was nice to have anyway. They theorised that the Room had refused to show Harry the place Mr. Crouch had chosen because Harry didn't have the faintest clue as to what it might have been – and the Room required at least some mental image to work from.

Currently, Harry doodled on a piece of parchment as he listened to his friends give updates on the suspects in their investigation. It had been a long day in a week of long days. Harry was making progress in his training with the Slytherins, but it wasn't fast enough, he wasn't fast enough, and the First task was approaching and most questions were still unanswered and – sometimes, Harry just got so tired of it all.

"Madame Maxime seems to be in the clear," Padma was saying. "I mean, no criminal record, no scandals, no juicy details. The only thing that might be of interest is that she is way too tall for a normal woman, so she might be part-giant." Padma gave a quick, one-shouldered shrug and smiled, eyes sparkling mischievously. "I don't think it matters though. Nobody with that sense of style could possibly be a bloodthirsty monster. I mean, have you seen that pelerine? I want one!"

"Get your parents to buy it for you," Blaise advised lazily from his sprawl on a different couch.

"Aha, and then Parvati will demand the same and I won't be unique anymore! Do you have any idea how hard it is to become a fashion icon when you have a twin sister?"

"No, but could we please get back on topic?" Hermione interrupted icily.

Padma rolled her eyes and leaned back against the sofa. Her long dark hair caught light fetchingly as she moved, giving Harry an odd urge to touch it and check whether it was as silky as it appeared. Instead, he doodled some more. The stick figure he'd drawn did not resemble Padma in any way.

"Professor Moody seems to be fine too," Hermione stated, shuffling through her notes. "He'd been an Auror for a very long time before retiring and caught a lot of Dark wizards. He's got all kinds of distinctions for service to the government. He was apparently really big in the last war... I couldn't find anything at all incriminating on him. Really, Dark wizards should be making him a target."

"So you're pretty sure it's not Moody," Harry said, looking up.

"Well, it's not like we can say for certain, can we? It's all conjecture, really – Moody might have turned into a Harry Potter-hating fanatic since he's retired, but I doubt it, and I think Dumbledore would have noticed his change in attitude," Hermione pointed out. "What is more interesting, however, is that Igor Karkaroff is apparently among the Death Eaters Moody has arrested."

"Moody caught Karkaroff?" Harry's eyebrows rose. "Now that's an interesting twist."

Karkaroff had, for the last week, been one of the two most solid suspects – from a hint here and a cautious word there among the older Slytherins, Harry had surmised that the man had been a Death Eater. That, of course, gave Karkaroff a great motive to want Harry dead; Death Eaters and Boys-Who-Lived did not mix well. At the same time, this revelation did not mean that the investigation was over. Harry had spent over three years in Slytherin, where a lot of kids with Death Eater ties resided, and he knew that, after Voldemort's fall, the general Death Eater trend had been to pretend that they'd never supported the Dark Lord. They might still harbour old allegiances, but they would not confess to it out loud – much less do something that would incriminate them. Neville and Hermione, in

particular, had trouble seeing it, but Harry, Blaise and Millie were in agreement: Karkaroff either had to be exceptionally brave to try and get at Harry in plain view of the whole world, or he had to have some very serious backing, which was a worry on a whole new level.

“Karkaroff gave up some names and was released. Moody must have been angry,” Hermione said. “He seems to really hate him still, you know.”

Him and everyone else in any way associated with the Death Eaters; Hermione should try attending Defence with Malfoy. Still, that rather proved Hermione’s point; Moody’s behaviour did seem to indicate that he was one of the least likely people to try and kill the Boy-Who-Lived. Moody had also never been mean to Harry, personally – brusque, maybe, but not nasty.

“And Terry says he’s got nothing on Bagman,” Padma informed them.

“The Weasley twins are looking into him too, they might find something,” Harry said. “They seem like they want to, anyway. I want to know what Crouch is up to, though, more than anything.”

“Is he still sneaking around?” Padma asked in interest.

“Yeah.” Harry frowned. “I’ve seen him in Moody’s office and in Dumbledore’s, too; they must have known he was there, because they were both with him. Still, why the sneaking around at night? I just don’t know. The whole thing seems weird.”

“It is,” Hermione agreed. “So, Headmaster Karkaroff and Mr. Crouch remain our biggest suspects thus far. Karkaroff’s past speaks against him, while Mr. Crouch is actually more suspicious, which is rather odd...”

Harry wished he’d have more time to watch the Map, but he had to attend classes, do homework, go through brutal training with the sixth year Slytherins, research spells in the Library, keep up with the investigation and try to find out what the First Task was. On the bright side, this level of busyness meant that Harry had very little time to panic over the First Task itself. Still, his nagging anxiety was

beginning to turn into a state of controlled panic, since he was no closer to discovering what might be demanded of him in just a little over a week. He knew he couldn't go into the Task blind; other champions might have enough talent to do so, but Harry needed to prepare, and duelling with the older students might very well not be enough. The only 'transferrable skill' he'd acquired (Hermione's phrasing, not his) was that, these days, he picked up new spells faster. Fuck knew if that would help any.

According to Anthony, the Tasks had varied greatly throughout history – and they might have changed in modern times, since the Tournament had not been held in so long. The point of the First Task was usually to obtain a certain object. Sometimes, the champions would have to fight a dangerous creature for it – in 1714, three werewolves had escaped and wreaked havoc, killing and turning numerous people. Sometimes, the champions would have to get through most trying obstacles, like Fiendfyre, for example (two champions had, apparently, burnt alive during that task; the final one won by default, even though he'd been disfigured for life). Sometimes, the Tasks were plain disturbing, like the ones with champions having to get through narrow spaces swarming with small and seemingly non-dangerous creatures, such as spiders, cockroaches or rats, which from the sheer quantity could make the contestant panic and fail to reach his goal.

None of that sounded good to Harry.

"The biggest flaw in our beautiful schemes is that we've still no idea what Harry is facing in a week," Blaise noted, voicing what was on everyone's minds. "The books don't know, parents and known Ministry people are keeping mum, teachers are merrily waiting for Harry to go to his doom. Have you written that will yet, Harry?"

A cushion sailed past Harry and hit Blaise squarely on the head.

"That's for upsetting our champion," Padma said primly. "Don't listen to him, Harry. I'm sure you'll do fine."

Yeah, right. If he was to have any hope of survival, he needed to learn exactly what the First Task entailed.



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“Dragons? Are you joking?”

Cedric was looking at Harry with wide eyes.

“I wish I was.” Harry grimaced and adjusted his bag on one shoulder.  
“It’s definitely dragons. I think we’ve got to get past them, but – ”

“How do you know?”

Harry shrugged. He wasn’t going to blab on Hagrid.

“I just do, okay? Never mind how. There are four dragons in the Forbidden Forest, one for each of us – ”

Cedric swore so creatively that Harry was impressed.

“So what you’re planning to do?” Cedric asked.

“As much research and practice as I – ”

Then, he saw a movement out of the corner of his eye. He swallowed the rest of his phrase and made a shushing gesture at Cedric, but it was too late; Professor Moody emerged out of a hidden alcove.

“Potter. Diggory,” he said gruffly.

“Good day, sir,” Cedric murmured.

Harry tried to maintain an impassive face, but he was pretty sure the ex-Auror had overheard their little discussion, quite illegal under the Tournament’s rules.

“Potter, you come with me,” Moody ordered, confirming Harry’s thoughts.

Damn. He really needed to learn some silencing wards in the nearest future.

Harry nodded to Cedric goodbye and followed the Professor to his office. Once there, he was surprised by the number of odd instruments and contraptions cluttering it up.

"Foe-Glass," Moody said, pointing at a large mirror-like surface, which reflected a few shadows lurking about in a vaguely threatening manner. "Lets you see whether your enemies are near."

"You take yours everywhere you go, then, sir?" Harry noted, not specifying whether he meant the enemies or the Foe-Glass.

Judging by the way Moody's magical eye swivelled to him, he'd picked up on that. Oh well.

"Constant vigilance, Potter. I've made a lot of enemies in my time."

"Of course, Professor."

Moody peered at Harry, limped up to his desk and took a swig out of his flask.

"Sit down, Potter." He waved at a nearby chair. "And stop looking so tense, I'm not about to turn you in for cheating at the First Task. Merlin knows, everyone does, and it's not like it could disqualify you anyway. Not that you'd mind, huh?"

Harry nodded, keeping his expression bland. Moody was all but eliminated from the list of suspects and hadn't ever done anything to Harry, but Harry was still somewhat wary. He didn't really understand this particular Defence Professor; the man seemed loud and outspoken, but Harry found that it was actually quite hard to tell what he was thinking. Didn't wear his heart on his sleeve, this Mad-Eye Moody.

There was silence for a while.

"So do you know what you're doing tomorrow?"

"Not quite, sir."

He'd done some research last night, after Hagrid had shown him the dragon, and Hermione and Anthony were in the Library at this very moment. Harry's mind kept turning to the last time he'd had to battle a magical creature – the basilisk in second year. Both dragons and basilisks were huge scaly beasts; the basilisk's weak points were those not protected by its hide, such as eyes and mouth. Harry couldn't help hoping that there were some parallels here he could exploit.

"Hah! Well, if I were to give you any advice, it would be to play to your strengths. Because all other champions will, and their strength is significantly greater than yours, Potter. Diggory is a stellar student, Delacour is not all looks and Krum is not all brawn. There's a reason why they were picked as champions."

Harry remained quiet. He could think of a few sarcastic remarks he could make, but he really didn't think it was wise to do so while he was alone in an office with a trigger-happy ex-Auror.

"Play to your strengths, Potter," Moody repeated, taking another hearty swig from the flask. "That's the best advice anyone can give you at this point."

Well –

"Are dragons related to snakes?"

The Professor stared at him.

"You were thinking of trying to speak to them in Parseltongue?"

So Moody had read Rita Skeeter's tales of Harry's horribleness, if he could connect the dots so easily. Rita had taken great pleasure in pointing out that Harry was a Parselmouth in addition to being a shady Slytherin.

"I was just wondering, sir."

Moody chuckled.

“Well, talk of novel approaches. No, lad, I’m afraid it wouldn’t work, but I was thinking of your more... ordinary talents. What are you good at?”

“Potions,” Harry said dryly. “Defence Against the Dark Arts. Quidditch – ”

“Now, think on that.”

It was Harry’s turn to stare. And not only because the Professor was coming too close to telling him how to deal with the dragon, but also –

“You think I should try to outfly it? Sir?”

“They tell me you’re pretty good on a broom, lad.”

Harry considered it. He was quite talented at flying; Slytherin’s star Seeker, he’d never lost a match to date. Could he outfly a dragon? Maybe. When talking to Hagrid, Charlie Weasley had said that they’d need to get past the dragon, not to fight it – and that dovetailed with the other First Tasks Anthony had told Harry about. Chances were, he needed to get past the beast to find a certain object. While it did not sound any more pleasant than trying to get through Fiendfyre, at least the dragon might have points of vulnerability – if Harry’s theory on similarity with basilisks stood, that is.

Harry felt a wave of relief: perhaps, with Moody suggestion and his own half-baked ideas, he’d be able to come up with at least a semblance of a viable plan for tomorrow.

“It’s very kind of you to counsel me, sir.”

Except that I don’t understand why you’re doing it.

It remained unsaid, but Moody must have understood the sentiment behind Harry’s words, because his face twisted into an ugly grimace.

“Dumbledore brought me in this year so that I could help to protect his students, and tomorrow you’re going up against a full-grown

dragon because someone's put your name in the Goblet. Doesn't sound too safe to me, lad, and I don't think the Ministry's stuck-up rules are worth risking your life over."

Harry could drink to that.

"I see, Professor."

"Well." Moody gave a cough. "Best of luck then, Potter."

"Thank you, sir."

Luck he would certainly need, but relying entirely upon chance was not Harry's preferred *modus operandi*; hopefully, he'd learn at least something useful with his friends' help before tomorrow.

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Harry walked out of the tent, wand at the ready, head high in the air, eyes alert on the dragon. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't terrified out of his mind, but thankfully, no one was asking; the people in the audience were staring at him and shouting something, but Harry couldn't really see or hear them in the state he was in. He was almost dizzy with adrenaline.

("The Tournament is not as dangerous as it used to be, but accidents can still happen... none of the tasks are to be conducted in a particularly controlled environment.")

Like hell he was going to let this kill him.

"Accio Nimbus 2001!"

The Hungarian Horntail finally noticed him and took a swipe with her spiked tail; Harry dove to the side, running for cover. He needed to get a good spot now, so that he could put phase two of the plan into action –

Harry dodged again, slipping on the rock; he hit his knee hard, but felt no pain. He hid behind a large boulder, and the dragon seemed to lose sight of him momentarily.

Harry aimed his wand and concentrated.

“Conjunctivitis inrogo!”

For a moment, nothing seemed to happen, and Harry’s heart sunk. He’d be fried like a fucking marshmallow here –

With a soft whooshing sound, his Nimbus appeared before him. Harry threw a leg over the broom and shot up in the air.

Rising on its hind legs, the dragon lunged straight for Harry.

Harry swerved, narrowly avoided a jet of flames, then another, and careened sideways, away from the dragon. Judging by the beast’s movements, the Conjunctivitis Curse had taken only partially. The dragon could not see Harry well, but still well enough to pursue him. Okay, plan not working, what now?

Recklessly, Harry dove for the eggs, singling out the golden one he was meant to snatch away, but another wide swipe of the dragon’s tail nearly threw him off his broom. Fuck this aimless flying. Time for some drastic action.

Pushing his broom to the limit, Harry sped upwards, flying right at the dragon’s head; like the basilisk, he thought disjointedly, I can do this... It was difficult to aim while swerving around on his broom in a mad dance with the dragon’s flames, but Harry was persistent.

“Morsus Apis!” The spell hit the dragon on the right eye. Hurriedly, Harry shot another, this one at the left, and dashed to the side.

Eyes were a dragon’s vulnerable spot, just like the basilisk’s; if the Conjunctivitis Curse had not worked well for Harry, he could try injuring the dragon in a different way – an illusion that a swarm of bees was biting it in the eyes had to hurt quite a lot.

The dragon had stopped moving. It stood, motionless, for two very long moments, and Harry waited with bated breath, ready to spring into action again if the dragon attacked – but then, the beast gave a slow blink.

And roared.

Harry dropped, avoiding a jet of fire; the dragon was shaking its head frantically, as if trying to fend off the bees, and Harry knew the illusion was working –

The beast lunged again, moving further away from its nest in an attempt to catch Harry, or maybe run away from the bees, Harry didn't know which, and the horrible screeching yowl of pain was nearly deafening him, but he didn't care.

He raced downward, wind rushing in his ears, heart thumping madly in his chest – the eggs were left vulnerable now, the dragon was too distressed to notice them now – close, so close, almost there – yes.

Harry's hand closed on the golden egg. He tucked it under his arm and felt a wave of heat engulf him from behind; glancing back, he saw that his broom was on fire. Harry swore, mind blank for a moment, but then it felt as if his robe was catching the flames, too – and, on reflex, he let go and jumped for the ground.

Harry crashed into the dirt and rolled, hoping to extinguish the flames. He was still clutching the egg; he wasn't letting go of something so hard-won. Thankfully, he'd been flying pretty low, so the fall hadn't hurt too badly. As soon as he felt his clothes stop burning, Harry shot to his feet and ran.

And suddenly, the Task seemed to be over.

Wizards poured onto the arena, now; Ludo Bagman was shouting something from the commentator booth – complimentary, no doubt, but Harry didn't give a damn. He was alive, he'd finished the First Task, he got the egg – he knew this much, even though he still couldn't process everything that had happened.

He was alive. He got the egg. He was done.

The First Task was over.

Harry was still grinning manically as the dragon-handlers led him away towards the first aid tent.

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It was rare for Harry to be glaringly, unequivocally happy, but he'd persisted in this state of high cheer for the last two weeks straight. Everything was going well. He was still alive, with his limbs intact, following the First Task – and he hadn't made an idiot out of himself in front of the whole world, either, which was a definite bonus. In fact, he was an absolute hero in Slytherin, and generally restored to the good graces of the school. Seeing him face a huge fire-breathing creature had apparently put their little grudges into perspective for most of the students. And Padma had somehow fought her way into the champion's tent in the aftermath and pounced on him, squealing about how dashing he'd been. Having a pretty girl admire your heroic deeds had been rather sweet, too.

Harry did count a loss – his trusty Nimbus 2001, courtesy of Malfoy père, had been completely ruined by dragon flames – but he decided to celebrate his continued survival by buying himself a nice shiny Firebolt. He'd also purchased a lot of chocolate for Hermione and Anthony, for helping him with the Conjunctivitis Curse – it might not have worked, but Harry appreciated the effort. The failure with the Curse and the loss of the broom made Harry lose points in the Task, but the judges had apparently been impressed by his 'creativity'; Cedric was currently in the lead as far as points went, but Harry was second, which was a long way from the miserable failure he'd been dreading.

First hurdle overcome, popularity restored, holidays in sight. Really, life was good.

It would be even better, though, if Harry'd made any progress on his investigation. He was actually ashamed to admit that, basking in the



post-Task euphoria, he had completely forgotten about the investigation for a while, until reminded of it by his friends.

("Making good use of our Map, Your Esteemed Slytherinness? Old Bartemius still sneaking about, then?")

So right now, Harry was on the way to an experiment. Harry had only ever checked the Map during his free time; he'd never made note of what Crouch did during classes and meals. He was in the castle at any time Harry had looked, which suggested that he had to be doing something with himself when everyone else was busy. Of course, it would be very difficult to watch the Map in class, so Harry had decided to try during dinner tonight. The main problem was concealing the Map from nosy students like Malfoy, who'd been sulkier than ever since Harry failed to die in the First Task. However, Harry thought he'd found a way around that.

He was quite eager to get to dinner. Neville, on the other hand, was not looking too cheerful as they walked from Potions together.

"So, Harry, who are you asking to the Yule Ball?" Neville inquired, a distinct lack of enthusiasm in his voice.

Harry told himself that he wasn't nervous about the dance. At all.

"Oh, Padma, I think," he said, trying to be offhand. He also hoped he wasn't blushing.

"Ah."

"Well," Harry said slyly, eager to divert attention from himself, "I know who you're going to ask..."

If anything, Neville's dark expression became even more miserable.

"It's not me Ginny likes."

Harry felt like hitting himself. How could he have forgotten even for a moment – Neville's infatuation with Ginny seemed as hopeless as Ginny's own crush on Harry was. It was awkward at the best of times,

but when Harry went and put his foot in his mouth...

"So, why the long faces?" Blaise exclaimed, catching up to them together with Millicent by the Great Hall doors. "What crawled up your arse and died, Longbottom, if you excuse me for asking?"

Neville threw the other boy an unexpectedly venomous look.

"Piss off, Zabini," he snapped and stormed away towards the Gryffindor table.

Harry, Blaise and Millicent stopped walking and stared at his retreating back. Blaise let out an appreciative whistle.

"Hey, Harry, I think your pet Gryffindor's growing fangs!"

"It's about time," Millie deadpanned. "Mind you, any sane person would have to shut you up after a while, Zabini, however spineless they might be."

"Neville's not spineless, Millie, and you know it," Harry said firmly. "If he doesn't spend most of his time biting your head off –"

"Oooh, but our Millie likes her men strong and gruff." Blaise grinned, throwing an arm about the girl's wide shoulders. "She likes 'em wild, she does. That's why she'll be asking one of those Crabbe-n-Goyle to the dance –"

Millie stomped on his foot. Hard. Harry laughed as Blaise wailed in pain, and counted himself lucky to have friends who provided a constant source of entertainment.

"Now, focus," he said to them in an undertone as they approached the Slytherin table. "You're serving as my cover tonight, remember?"

Luna waved at him from the Ravenclaw table when he passed by; he smiled at her and shook his head at Padma's eye-roll.

About halfway through the meal, Harry elbowed Blaise and Millie in warning.

“Do you still have my book?” Millie asked, as agreed.

“What book?”

“The one you promised you’d return to me at dinner,” Millie said in such a chilly voice that Harry had nearly fallen for the ruse himself.

“Oh,” he muttered. “That book. Wait a second.”

He heaved his bag onto his lap and peered inside, looking at the Map. He had it opened at the Great Hall; most of the school’s population was here right now. A lot of dots were cluttering up the small space on the map, but it was probably pointless to look, since Crouch couldn’t... be here... except that he was.

Harry stared at the dot. Then he raised his head and looked around, wondering what was faulty – his eyes or the Map, because he could certainly not see Crouch in the Great Hall, but the Map insisted he was here, along with about three hundred other dots. Harry frowned, trying to figure out where in the Hall the Map believed Crouch to be, but with so many dots present, they were all more or less on top of each other, it was impossible to tell who was where...

“Potter! Are you planning to return my book to me or not?” Millie asked threateningly.

Harry jumped. He’d probably looked weird gazing into his bag, but this was a really bizarre situation.

“You know what? You look,” he said, giving the bag to Millie. Two heads better than one and everything.

“Just confess you don’t have it,” Blaise advised. “Spare yourself a lot of pain later.”

Speaking of pain later... Harry glanced at Miles Bletchley, Edward Montague and Adrian Pucey, who were sitting further up the table.

His training sessions had been temporarily suspended by silent agreement, and Harry wasn't sure whether they would be started up again over the Christmas holidays. Most of the school was staying to attend the Yule Ball, after all... Besides, there was also the question whether or not Harry should get them Christmas presents. He'd already done most of his Christmas shopping, but he probably should get the sixth year Slytherins some thank-you gifts. Something that showed his appreciation but implied no familiarity. Something not too cheap, but not too expensive. Something appropriate. Harry grimaced. Maybe he'd ask Padma or Hermione; girls were good with being sensitive about things.

And he still needed to ask Padma to the Ball, damn it. Would it be weird? They were friends, after all. What if she didn't like him that way? What if she said no and their friendship would be ruined?

Millie distracted Harry from that thought, thrusting the bag back at him.

"So?" Blaise asked, when it seemed that Millie would offer no comment.

"So I'll be having a talk with Potter about this later," Millie said darkly. "When he's behaving less barmy."

Harry nodded. Having a meeting in the Hidden Room sounded like a good idea to him, too.

Harry spent the rest of the meal trying to sort out the situation with Crouch in his head. What did he know? He'd seen Crouch sneak around the castle at night; the man had been doing something in the Hidden Room – which could have turned into anything, from a Potions laboratory to a nuclear power station, though he doubted it was the latter. He'd also seen Crouch in Dumbledore's office with Dumbledore and in Moody's office with Moody. That suggested that they, at least, were aware of his presence. Then there was the fact of Crouch's invisible presence at dinner... invisible! Wait a moment. Maybe Crouch had an Invisibility Cloak, just like Harry! That would explain why Harry couldn't find him, but the Map could.

Harry gazed unseeingly into his desert, thinking furiously.

If Crouch operated under an Invisibility Cloak, there were two main options. Either he was hiding from everyone, including Dumbledore and Moody – in which case he might be spying on them for the Ministry, or something. Or else he was there with their approval and sanction, maybe conducting an investigation in secret, too – hell, he could be doing the same thing as Harry and covertly trying to discover who had put Harry's name in the Goblet! There were a lot of possibilities there. Harry thought back to Mr. Crouch and frowned. He's seen the man twice – once at the initial Goblet ceremony and again after the First Task. Harry couldn't say that Crouch had come across as the kind of man likely to sneak around under Invisibility Cloaks, tempting adventure.

Still, the evidence was there; respected, boring-looking Ministry official or not, Crouch was covertly operating at Hogwarts. Harry just needed to find out why.

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The Great Hall doors opened slowly, revealing the crowd that had congregated inside. Harry stepped in with Padma on his arm, trying to ignore the stares. Such was the Yule Ball tradition: the champions made a grand entrance into the ballroom once everyone else was already waiting. Viktor and Hermione were walking in front of Harry and Padma; Viktor was used to spotlight, but Hermione was terrified of tripping on her dress or ruining her hairstyle, Harry could tell. Padma, Fleur and Cho, on the other hand, revelled in the attention.

"Relax, Harry," Padma said out of the corner of her mouth, which was fixed in a bright smile. "It's much more likely that you'll make an idiot out of yourself if you're nervous."

"Thanks, that makes me feel loads more confident," Harry sniped back, but bantering with her did make him feel more at ease.

Thankfully, the long walk to the high table ended and they took their seats; the Triwizard judges and the champions were all present, except for Mr. Crouch – his place had been for some reason taken by Percy Weasley, of all people.

“Mr. Crouch has entrusted me with standing in for him,” Percy explained pompously, once they had ordered their meals.

“You work for him, then?” Harry asked, thinking through possible lines of questioning.

“I am his personal assistant,” Percy answered in a tone that suggested he was the most trusted pupil of Merlin.

“I see,” Harry said, trying to appear impressed. “And – ”

“What’s it like, working at the Ministry just after you finish Hogwarts?” Cedric asked. “My dad kind of expects me to join him, after I graduate.”

“Indeed?” Percy said. “What department do you plan to work in?”

“Well, my dad’s in Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, but there’s no way I’m doing that,” Cedric stated resolutely. “If I’ve had doubts, the dragons and the Skrewts made up my mind for me.”

Harry snorted. Percy cleared his throat.

“Well, it very much depends what department you join. I had been lucky with my boss, but I have heard tales from the less fortunate...”

Harry sighed. It seemed that Cedric had hijacked Percy for the time being. He turned his attention to his date, but Cho and Padma were engrossed in a hushed conversation about Hermione’s makeover, her dress and Krum. Both girls were apparently shocked at the fact that Hermione and Krum as much as knew each other, although they counted quite a few instances when both had been seen in the Library at the same time.

“How very typical of Granger to find a date in the Library, isn’t it?” Padma noted. “So tragically clichéd.”

“I don’t know her at all,” Cho confessed. “She seems a bit – ”

“Uptight?” Padma suggested. “If not for Longbottom, she’d have bored herself to death a long time ago. Mind you, I think it’s quite unfortunate of Longbottom to take Ginny Weasley to the Ball – he’s a sweet boy, but he seriously needs to get over her, because it’s getting old.”

Harry happened to disagree in that he was really glad to see Neville happy. He positively glowed as he sat next to Ginny Weasley; the only problem was that Ginny did not seem to enjoy herself nearly as much as Neville was, unless distance was playing tricks on Harry’s sight.

And Harry really hoped that, one day, Padma and Hermione would get over their dislike of each other, because that was getting really old too.

Right now, Hermione was teaching Krum how to pronounce her name.

“Herm-own-na,” Krum recited obediently.

“No, it’s Her-my-oh-nee,” she corrected.

“Hermy-oh-ninny,” Krum repeated.

It was probably the least intellectual conversation Harry had ever heard Hermione engaged in, but she seemed to be enjoying herself.

“... in the end, it’s really important to do what you actually enjoy,” Percy was saying. “And it depends on what you wish to achieve in life.”

“I was thinking of maybe Magical Accidents and Catastrophes,” Cedric answered. “I mean, it sounds like they do a lot of interesting stuff, from what I hear.”

Harry tuned their conversation out again.

Dumbledore, Madame Maxime and Karkaroff seemed to be exchanging highly sophisticated barbs, disguised as compliments.

Well, Dumbledore was mostly reflecting gibes aimed at him, but then again, it was bad form for a host to insult his guests.

"I hope the dancing starts soon," Padma said, turning to Harry. "You do remember the steps I taught you, right?"

"Er, vaguely."

Padma smiled, slightly exasperated.

"Remind me again, why did I agree to go out with you?"

"Because I'm a dashing hero?" Harry suggested, not too sure himself.

"Fame isn't everything, Mr. Potter," Padma said and then added dramatically, after a moment's thought: "You cannot buy my affections!"

"That's right I can't," Harry agreed. "The amount of sweets and jewellery you require could clear the debt off of a small Third World country."

Cho snickered.

"The concept of romance is completely lost on him," Padma explained to her. "Besides, he's really very rich, so I don't know what he's complaining about. It's not like the bracelet I asked for was that expensive. And I did reconsider that necklace."

Harry could distantly hear Fleur relating to Roger Davies the particular ways in which Beauxbatons was superior to Hogwarts; Davies was lapping it up with a vacantly adoring expression on his face. Fleur, on the other hand, seemed to be getting progressively more irritated with his monosyllabic replies.

"We 'ave foie gras and champagne for breakfast," Fleur snapped in a voice that clearly called for Roger Davies to grow a brain and contradict her. "Ze statues at Beauxbatons 'ave been made by Benvenuto Cellini. Ah, what would you know of art... Marie, Queen of Scots – she graduated from Beauxbatons!"



“Yeah,” Davies agreed, eyes glazed with lust.

The way Fleur gripped her steak knife made Harry mildly concerned for Roger Davies’s health.

Percy and Cedric were still talking. Harry had tried diverting the subject, but it was a vain attempt that only distracted them for a few moments. Percy seemed eager to talk about his boss, though; Harry could catch him later during the night and grill him in a more informal setting.

When the time came for the champions to open the dance, Harry was very nervous – and he had probably stepped on Padma’s feet at least twice, but he tried his best to remember the simple steps she had taught him. Thankfully, once the rest of the public had joined in the dance, the champions’ blunders became much less obvious, so Harry could relax and enjoy the evening. Apart from talking to Percy, it was all fun and frolics from there – needling Blaise who was crushing on Fleur, laughing at Ron Weasley who had no date, and finding a moment alone with Padma, who was her usual charming, impossible self.

Disclaimer: JK Rowling has many things to call her own that I do not. Like, a huge fortune, honorary degrees from several universities... and Harry Potter.

A/N: I thank Gwendolyn most sincerely for beta'ing. Also, she gets the credit for any and all spells that you don't recognise. Awkward Latin likely means that I looked things up in online dictionaries and forgot to check with her...

Also, let me say in advance that the chapter ends where it does for length reasons. It's already very long, I couldn't let it get longer. Speaking of, I wonder how it works - the chapter has a lot more words on the FFN word count than on my computer...

On a slightly different note, there will be swearing, but you probably knew that already.

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The arrival of January brought an end to Harry's temporary reprieve.

All at once, he was thrown into a whirlwind of events. Classes resumed, as did Harry's training with the Slytherins; Rita Skeeter published an article about Hagrid, who required a lot of patient comforting in the aftermath. Moreover, Cedric figured out the clue of the golden egg and informed Harry of what it entailed, which meant that Harry spent most of January trying to fathom how to breathe underwater for an hour. The answer came from the most unexpected of places – Neville beat all the Ravenclaws and Hermione to the solution – but it had still been rather stressful for a while.

And time abandoned all pretence of decency and whooshed past with breakneck speed – just yesterday, Harry was ordering gillyweed from Italy with the help of Blaise's uncle, but right now was for some reason already two weeks later, and he stood with the other champions and listened to Ludo Bagman explain the particulars of the Second Task.

Quite an incredible and unwelcome development, that.

It was a gloomy, windy February morning – not the kind when a lot of people fancied a stroll outside, normally, but today most students from Hogwarts and both visiting schools were gathered by the lakeshore. The champions displayed a blatant lack of enthusiasm, and Harry believed that they had a damn good reason for that. All this time, while he'd been researching and preparing, he had not realised that "what he'd sorely miss" would be an actual person, trapped with merpeople in the lake until he got around to saving them. He'd thought it would be another object he'd have to retrieve, but a human being? What if a champion failed at the task?

No use dwelling on that, though. Harry knew what he was going to do, praise be to Neville and his love for Herbology. He would just have to do his best – he was as prepared as he was ever going to get.

"Now, if the champions are ready..." Bagman said, rubbing his hands in glee. Percy Weasley, who was replacing Crouch again, looked faintly embarrassed by Bagman's exuberance. "Three, two, one, go!"

Harry put gillyweed into his mouth and started chewing; it tasted awful and had slimy texture that made him think of jellyfish. While Harry struggled to swallow the bits and pieces of the magical plant, he watched other champions disappear underwater. That half-shark transfiguration was really brave of Viktor; Cedric's and Fleur's Bubblehead Charms were much less interesting.

Harry, at this very moment, was developing gills.

Feeling himself begin to struggle for breath, Harry plunged into the lake. It was bizarre to have a different organ than his nose to breathe with, but he didn't have time to contemplate that. Looking around the underwater world in interest – everything was very green and blue here, and surreal in its fluidity of movement – Harry dove deeper. He swam between odd, large-leaved water plants, which felt almost like wading through a forest; a school of fish darted past him faster than he could figure out what they were. He was just about to cast a Point Me spell when he felt something grab his ankle.

A Grindylow was holding on to Harry's leg with brittle fingers, smiling toothily and trying to drag Harry down.

“Relashio!”

Harry’s words came out garbled, but that didn’t matter, because the Grindylow whined in pain anyway: its hands appeared to be scalded.

“Stupefy!”

More water demons were coming; Harry swam quickly away. As far as he remembered, Grindylows dwelled among weeds. Time to get out of the weedy area.

The scenery changed as Harry moved forward. Now, he was in what seemed to be an underwater valley – and, judging by the darkness, not any closer to the surface than before. Something rather large loomed in the distance – a merpeople colony, perhaps? Harry swam closer, cautiously, but still couldn’t quite make out what he was seeing.

It appeared to be an overturned column lying on the lake bed – no, wait, several stacked columns – but they seemed to be pretty bendy...

Oh hell.

Harry stopped in his tracks and began inching backwards. There, lounging in front of him and beginning to uncoil its tentacles, was the Giant Squid.

Harry was not dealing with this.

He backed away slowly at first, so as not to disturb the water too much and alert the Squid to his presence. Having withdrawn somewhat, he swam as fast as possible to get away from there. Paying no attention to his surroundings, he made a goal out of putting enough distance between himself and the huge mollusc.

After a while, Harry’s ears discerned strange sounds reaching from somewhere to his left; they reminded him distinctly of the voices he’d heard in the golden egg. He advanced in that direction, clutching his

wand and remaining on guard just in case – he'd been fooled once already. However, this time he seemed to have stumbled onto the real thing.

The words of the song got clearer as Harry swam through the merpeople village, trying to ignore the suspicious gazes of the inhabitants. It was strange, seeing this sort of life – rough stone houses, domesticated Grindylows, and merpeople themselves, so different from their idealised fairy-tale version Harry had grown up with. With their green hair, scaly skin and yellowed teeth, they resembled Grindylows' human-sized cousins.

Three hostages were tied to a merperson monument in the middle of the town square, all of them in deep sleep. With a start, Harry saw Neville and Hermione; there was also a little girl with the same blonde, flowing hair Fleur flaunted. Right now, of course, the hair was more green than blonde, which only deepened the pallor of the girl's face.

Relieved to have finally made it, Harry approached Neville. He hesitated between him and Hermione for a moment, but then remembered that she and Krum were dating, sort of. Neville, on the other hand, could not be any other champion's hostage.

The merpeople floated around, pointing and glaring threateningly, but they made no move to hinder Harry in any way as he fiddled with Neville's ropes. The sleeping boy was a dead weight on Harry, once released; Harry tugged him upwards, determined to get out of there once and for bloody all.

This underwater adventure had been sort of fun at the very beginning, but now it was getting creepy and exhausting – and Harry was starting to feel distinctly short of breath.

"And the second champion returns!" Ludo Bagman's voice greeted Harry as he surfaced from the lake, sputtering. "And it's Harry Potter! He's made it back with his hostage in second place – let's have a round of applause!"

Once ashore, Harry had been guided to Madam Pomfrey; she gave him a blanket and fed him a Pepperup Potion, muttering ceaselessly

about reckless adventures and dangers to children's health. Harry smiled and waved at Cedric, who sat next to Cho Chang a little distance away; Viktor had still not made it back, and Fleur seemed to be crying. Harry frowned – did she mess up the task?

“Huh – where – what happened?”

It took a little while to fill Neville in. The Gryffindor seemed to be flabbergasted to have taken part in the task and at the same time flattered that he turned out to be the person Harry'd miss most.

Harry was sort of surprised to know that too, actually. He wondered who determined these things for the purposes of the task.

Which he was, by the way, done with. As in, finished. No more Second Task, ever.

“Merlin's beard-d, it's c-c-cold,” Neville gasped.

Harry didn't really mind. If feeling chilled to the bone was tangible proof that he was done with two thirds of this Tournament, he could definitely deal with this.

“You know what's funny?” he said. “You've really saved yourself, here. If you hadn't told me about gillyweed, both of us would have been fish food by now.”

Neville grinned.

“Champions these days. Can't leave anything to them – got to think of your own rescue plans.”

“Well, there's always better things to do than go around rescuing random Gryffindors,” Harry drawled. “Seriously, though, that was really some spectacular thinking, Nev.”

Neville actually blushed.

“It's no big deal,” he said, fidgeting under the blanket. “I didn't actually think of it all by myself, I only remembered because I read about it

recently. It's a really interesting book, I got it from Professor Moody –

"You what?" Harry asked, focusing sharply on Neville. "And you didn't think to mention it until now?"

Neville blinked in confusion.

"Well, I – should I have?"

"Harry!"

Harry turned around, still absorbed in the conversation with Neville.

"Hey, Padma," he said absently.

The girl put her hands on her hips.

"Honestly, Harry, you've just passed a devilishly tricky task, risking life and limb, and all you can say is hey, Padma? I'm not going to hug you, you're all wet, but – well, I'm glad you're all right, and I think you might be getting a high score – they're just taking their time getting the Beauxbatons girl's sister out, she didn't make it apparently." Padma rolled her eyes. "So yes, can you explain to me why I wasn't the person you'd miss above all others?"

And suddenly, just like that, a pretty girl transformed into a frightening harpy. Harry's eyes widened.

"Um – I don't know?" he tried. "I mean, I wasn't the one who made the choice –"

"Cedric and Viktor had to rescue Cho and Hermione." Padma flipped her hair back in an exasperated fashion. "For what reason didn't your girlfriend deserve the same attention?"

Harry cast around for something to say. He glanced at Neville only to see him snigger at Harry's expense.

“Well, Fleur’s hostage was her sister!” Harry seized on that fact gleefully. “So see, I’m not the only one – ”

“Oh, so it’s Fleur now, is it?” Padma narrowed her eyes.

“Listen – ”

“No, you listen!” Padma cried dramatically. “I’ve noticed you ogle her in that swimsuit!”

“It’s an, um, interesting swimsuit – ”

“The only reason why I’m even considering forgiving you is that you’ve just been through a traumatising experience,” Padma said in clipped notes and stormed off – probably to complain to Mandy Brocklehurst about Harry’s behaviour.

Harry became aware of uproarious laughter; the twins weren’t even trying to be discreet.

“When did you get here?” he asked, sulkily.

“Oh, a bit ago.” George snickered.

“And, Harry, our friend, this is no way to treat a lady.” Fred shook his head.

“Go to hell,” Harry advised and then complained, gazing after Padma: “She used to be a lot nicer to me when we were just friends.”

More laughter from his considerate, supportive companions served as his only answer.

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Once the excitement of the Second Task wore off a bit, all hostages were returned and the scores counted, Harry tracked down Percy Weasley and asked, putting on a suitably concerned expression:

“Your boss is still feeling under the weather, then?”



After all, Percy was again here instead of Crouch. At the Yule Ball, Percy had admitted to not having seen Crouch for quite a while, which confirmed Harry's belief about him skulking around Hogwarts under an Invisibility Cloak.

"Mr. Crouch trusts me to be capable of representing him," Percy said.

This did not answer Harry's question.

"So you still haven't seen him?"

"I receive my instructions by owl and am perfectly satisfied with such an arrangement," Percy pronounced, tips of his ears reddening slightly. "If you have some concern to bring up with Mr. Crouch, I can forward your request to him, and – oh, hello, sir."

Mad-Eye Moody was limping up to them; both his eyes, magical and normal, were fixed on Harry.

"Inquiring after old Barty, eh, Potter?"

"Not really, sir," Harry said. "It's just that he's one of the judges and hasn't been around for a while."

More like, hasn't been in the open for a while; according to the Map, the man was spending all his time in Hogwarts.

"I expect Barty thinks he's got better things to do than putting in an appearance here." Moody snorted. "Off making important decisions. Always was a pompous arse, that one."

Percy looked scandalised.

"With all due respect, sir – "

"Oh, don't bother, Weasley," Moody interrupted, waving him off. "Barty knows what I think of him, and that's that. Congratulations on completing the task, by the way, Potter."

“Thank you, sir.”

And that was just peachy, but it was Moody’s book that enabled him to succeed in the first place. Harry somehow didn’t think it was a coincidence that Moody just happened to give Neville the one book that contained the answer to the Second Task; this, in conjunction with Moody’s help on the First Task, was making Harry’s warning bells go off. He glanced at Moody, wondering whether it was a good idea to bring it up.

Moody frowned at him.

“Run along then, lad. Your friends want to see you, going by the way they’re waving.”

In the end, Harry figured that it would be imprudent to tell Moody anything, but he did discuss the matter with his friends at the next earliest opportunity. Millie looked like she was going to strangle Neville for neglecting to mention where he got the gillyweed information; Hermione, on the other hand, rushed to his defence.

“Neville didn’t think it was important because, in case you’re forgetting, by that point we had decided that Professor Moody was innocent!”

“Not as innocent as we’d thought, apparently,” Harry noted.

“All he’s done was nudge you in the right direction,” Hermione said reasonably. “And it’s unfair of him to help you over Cedric, but you are the younger champion.”

“Maybe he’s helping Harry for ideological reasons,” Terry suggested. “He’s famous for fighting Dark wizards, right – well, maybe he’s gone batty in old age and secretly worships Harry for getting rid of the Darkest of them all.”

“Does he have anything to gain?” Anthony questioned. “His actions are only suspicious if he derives any profit from helping Harry, but he’s only been making sure that Harry can pass the tasks safely – ”

“Free cheese is only found in the mousetrap,” Blaise said lightly, with the air of one quoting from somewhere. “You’re not really falling for this show of altruism, are you?”

Terry raised an eyebrow and answered with his own question:

“Has it occurred to you, perhaps, that all of you Slytherins are simply paranoid?”

It had, actually, but Harry was not one to believe in random kindness. No adult – bar Snape, on those few occasions when duty forced him to – had ever gone out of their way to assure Harry’s well-being, and he didn’t see why Moody would do so now. Crouch was definitely not the only one who bore watching.

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Mindful of the long break before the next task – it was only the end of February now, and the Third Task wasn’t until late June – Harry threw himself into the investigation. He watched the Map carefully, on the lookout for Moody as well as Crouch, and soon noticed an oddity that had, with time, acquired an eerie feel. Quite simply, Moody never left his office. Harry could not, of course, monitor the Map constantly, and he had never checked it in Moody’s presence – the risk of exposure to Moody’s all-seeing eye was too high – but the Map seemed convinced that Moody remained perpetually in his quarters. Crouch, conversely, was still wandering around – although Harry paid less attention to his comings and goings, consumed as he was with trying to catch Moody out of his office.

To that end, he came up with a project that would circumvent Moody’s magical eye. It would require a lot of time and effort, but be worth it in the end, Harry was sure.

While Harry had been busy monitoring Crouch and Moody, his friends unearthed other secrets – some of which threw Harry for a loop.

“Bagman?” he repeated, staring at the twins in disbelief. “A Death Eater?”

“Well, no,” Fred said with obvious regret. “But pretty close – an informant, of sorts.”

“He didn’t know the people he’d been passing information to were Death Eaters, see,” George explained. “He was cleared by the Wizengamot on grounds of ignorance, general stupidity and being a Quidditch star, if the past newspapers are anything to go by.”

“And it’s public record,” Fred added, gloomily. “Half-forgotten, but public. Not exactly blackmail material.”

“Seriously, what has he done to you?” Harry inquired. “I mean, I’m grateful for the information, but you’ve been a little too eager about this from the start.”

The twins sighed, shrugged, exchanged glances and launched into a tale of the Quidditch World Cup, gambling and leprechaun gold, which really did not sound pretty. Harry could not help much with that, but he was proud of teaching the twins the daunting – and completely impractical as far as duelling went – curse with the incantation of *Donarent mendaces tui muscas conluei tibi in dextri nari*, which roughly translated to May your lie make flies of the muckheap infect your right nostril. It was meagre revenge, perhaps, but revenge nonetheless, and the twins’ estimation of Harry had clearly gone up at that bit of creative curse knowledge.

Harry didn’t confess to the unglamorous truth that he obtained that knowledge by spending half his waking hours in the Library, trying to save his skin from bloodthirsty sixth-year Slytherins.

The next portion of explosive information came from Hermione, as Harry sat in that said Library, poring over books on magical illusions and deceptions for his “fooling Moody’s eye” project. Hermione stormed over to his desk and grimly laid out old issues of the Daily Prophet, having apparently taken a page out of the twins’ book.

“Read,” she said, in a horrible voice. “Just – read it.”

So Harry did, and soon he understood the reason for the sickened expression on Hermione's face. Crouch had apparently also had connections with the Death Eaters, in his day. He had not done anything himself, but his son was convicted and thrown into Azkaban, where he died soon afterwards. The papers might have yellowed with age, but the magical photographs on them were still moving – and Harry was sure that the image of the young Crouch being led away by the Dementors as his father looked coldly on would stay with Harry for quite a while.

"Well," Blaise noted flippantly, when he'd heard, "Crouch is not what you'd call a family man, is he?"

Harry was pretty sure that, if Hermione and Blaise hadn't been on non-speaking terms as it was, Hermione would have severed all ties with Blaise right then and there.

"An awful, awful man," she said. "I think you should go to a teacher with what you know, Harry."

Terry, Anthony and Neville seconded that motion, but Harry was still reluctant. There weren't many people he could go to, because he was sure that Blaise and Millie were right – pretty much any teacher would run to Dumbledore first thing. McGonagall certainly seemed to be in his pocket, and, whatever Terry said, Harry was having a hard time imagining Flitwick solving any important issues without involving the ultimate authority in the school. Blaise and Millie had predictably advocated Snape's candidacy –

("If he doesn't kill you, he'll do something to help you...")

– but Harry didn't even want to open that can of worms, because a search through the old newspapers (deemed necessary once the old issued had proven themselves so useful twice), revealed that Snape, of all people, had Death Eater ties too.

Snape was the final straw. Harry had long known that his Head of House had a murky past, but who didn't? As far as he could tell, the last war hadn't been kind to anyone. Both sides of the war committed atrocities and ruined lives, while those who chose no sides stood idly

by and let it all happen; finally, as Blaise was fond of reminding him, history was written by the victors. However, the knowledge that Snape had been a Death Eater still came as a blow, because – what the fuck had the man been doing warning Harry about werewolves and other dangers when he had that on his resume? According to old newspaper issues, Snape had actually been a spy for Dumbledore; Dumbledore, at his trial, supported this view and got Snape released. Dragging any information out of Harry's fellow Slytherins proved to be about as useful as banging his head against a brick wall.

("He'd been acquitted, Potter, completely acquitted of everything and Dumbledore vouched for him, so mind your own business if you know what's good for you.")

Of course, Snape's post-war record had to be squeaky-clean, because his Death Eater involvement was public knowledge; he would not be allowed anywhere near children if there remained grounds for suspecting him. Still, Harry really didn't want his Head of House to be a Death Eater, however redeemed – but nobody was asking for his opinion.

With all those revelations, plus the normal class workload and his training on top, it was unsurprising that Harry didn't devote nearly as much attention to Padma as he perhaps ought to have done. He did try to be thoughtful and bought her tons of chocolate to make up for his constant busyness, but he heard of his mistreatment of her with increasing frequency all through the month.

("I can't be the only one who's trying to make this relationship work!")

It wasn't entirely his fault, though, and he wasn't sorry for failing to notice Padma's new shoes, either, because who the hell cared, and not for blowing himself up on her minefield of wrong answers, because she left him no right ones. Padma was still very pretty and smelled enticingly of vanilla, but it just wasn't worth it anymore, and Padma seemed to agree, but for reasons of her own and completely different from his. Fleur's swimsuit figured into them somehow.

The situation was bound to explode, sooner or later, and Harry was faintly surprised they'd lasted till the end of March, when nothing had

really gone right with them ever since the Second Task, if not before that.

“Harry, I’m tired of waiting for you to recall that you have a girlfriend! The way you just forgot Valentine’s Day – ”

“Well, I was a little preoccupied by the Second Task at that point – ”

“That’s not an excuse for everything, Harry! Being a champion doesn’t mean it’s okay for you to ignore my feelings – ”

“Yes, but it does mean that I’m trying to keep myself alive here.”

“Oh, so you are saying you have no time for me? Well, then - I wish you’d never asked me to the Ball at all!”

“Look, I – ”

“Honestly... imagining our relationship was a lot better than dating you turned out to be.”

Yeah, well, that about summed it up for him, too.

They’d managed to stay on speaking terms, just; Harry wasn’t sure whether things would ever return to the way they used to be, before this fiasco of a relationship, but he hoped that it was possible. Padma had been fun when they were friends. Dating her only screwed everything up, even though there were fun sides to that, too... Ah well. It was all over now.

Freed of the burden of trying to be a good boyfriend, Harry concentrated on his project, working to disguise the Marauder’s Map to look like a page of his Defence textbook. Inwardly, he feared the moment the general school population would find out about his breakup with Padma, because, with him being such a public figure, he was sure that some rather serious shit would hit the fan then.

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Harry sat in the Defence classroom with the rest of his classmates, textbook in hand, pretending to do last-minute revision for the lesson. Blaise and Millie were beside him, chatting between themselves; they threw occasional looks at Harry, but did not disturb him. It was fortunate, because Harry was engaged in something much more important than revision.

His eyes were glued to the Map.

He'd finally succeeded to make it look as an innocuous page in his textbook; not an easy bit of spellwork by any means – it had been more complicated than disguising his book cover back at Neville's during the summer – but he was proud of the result. Unless someone knew specifically what to look for, they would not recognise the disguised Map. That was especially important when Harry wanted to fool someone in possession of a crazy magical eye.

Harry scanned the Map, trying to sort through hundreds of dots cluttering the hallways. The Harry Potter dot was surrounded by dots labelled with his Slytherin classmates' names; there was nobody else in the Defence classroom yet. Harry moved his gaze upward to the second floor, where the Defence Professor's office was located.

The dot labelled Alastor Moody was right there.

Curiouser and curiouser. Harry waited patiently, not taking his eyes from Moody's dot, as the time for the Defence lesson drew nearer; one way or another, he was solving the mystery today.

He jumped when he heard Moody's voice boom from nearby:

"Pay attention, you brats, when the lesson is starting! Now, where's that blasted class roll..."

Incredulous, Harry raised his eyes. Mad-Eye Moody stood at the front of the classroom, having just walked in through the door – wooden leg, scowling face, magical eye and all.

Harry dropped his gaze to the Map again, seeking out the Defence classroom this time – and there it was. In plain sight. Black on white,



all the rest of it – Bartemius Crouch. Crouch was the only person, apart from Harry and his classmates, in the Defence room, and Harry didn't know what he'd been expecting to see, but it wasn't this.

"Potter! I've called your name once already, what are you waiting for?" Moody barked.

Except that this wasn't Moody, this was Crouch, and that fact seemed completely outrageous when Harry was staring into Moody's face.

"Um, sorry, I'm present, sir," Harry muttered automatically, trying to find a way to somehow make any of this make sense.

Moody's – Crouch's – eyes met his and, for a terrifying second, it seemed to Harry that he knew. However, the moment passed quickly; Harry blinked, Moody coughed, someone's chair creaked, and Harry felt silly for being so paranoid.

"Pass your essays up front!" Moody demanded. "Anyone who hasn't mentioned the Impediment Jinx is going to have a detention with Filch, for sheer damn stupidity."

Harry passed his essay on, without paying attention to Moody's words. Fourth year defence was quite easy, most of the time. The sixth-year Slytherins started throwing non-verbal spells at Harry lately – that was something to worry about, not a measly Impediment Jinx, and certainly not under circumstances such as these.

Moody, who was teaching Defence, was not Moody, but Crouch. What the hell?

Harry stared at the desktop, thinking furiously. The only logical conclusion was that Crouch was pretending to be Moody. However, Harry had seen them both at the same time as recently as the First Task. Both Moody and Crouch had been in the audience then. He'd noticed Crouch sneaking about before that. Wait – Crouch stopped coming to work at about that time, according to Percy Weasley, didn't he? Okay. Possibly, Crouch had simply been creeping about Hogwarts before the First Task, looking for ways to impersonate Moody. Or preparing for it, somehow. After the First Task, Crouch

stopped coming to work, confined Moody to his office and started wearing his face instead.

What for?

Never mind. For some nefarious purpose, no doubt.

Harry glanced at Blaise and Millie, wishing they could communicate telepathically – maybe then, they wouldn't just sit there with such carefree expressions, unaware that something momentous had transpired.

"Now, pair up," Moody snapped, attracting Harry's attention again. "We'll be reviewing the Shield Charm today."

Of course they would be.

Was it just Harry's imagination, or Moody was looking at him more often than normally?

Harry's concentration was shot, but the Shield Charm was something he could cast in his sleep, and the remaining part of the class was devoted to a lecture on a curse Harry already knew. He could afford some distraction. He tried not to trail fake Moody with his eyes – looking for signs that this was actually Crouch – and doodled on his parchment instead. He just wanted the lesson to end. Not only did he fear giving himself away, but it was just plain creepy, and someone had to be notified as soon as possible –

"What did you say to Millie?" Harry muttered to Blaise, eyeing her retreating back as they packed books and parchment into their bags after class. Now was really not the time for them to quarrel. "There's something –"

"Potter!" Moody's voice called from behind them, and Harry's heart skipped a beat. "Stay behind, will you?"

Harry turned around, plastering an apologetic smile onto his face.

"I'm sorry, Professor, but I've got to run," he said, inching backwards. Crouch wouldn't dare do anything in public, would he? "I've got – detention with Professor Snape right now, so –"

He could feel Blaise's surprise radiating off of him; Blaise knew perfectly well that Harry didn't have a detention – Harry never got detentions.

"Detention, you say?" Crouch muttered.

"Yes, sir." Harry nodded and made several steps backwards. Soon, there will be nobody in the classroom but him, Crouch and Blaise; it did not bode well. "Professor Snape will kill me if I'm late."

"Well, Snape can bring it up with me if he likes," Crouch snapped. "Zabini, out. I've got to have a word with Potter, here."

Blaise threw a sideways look at Harry; Harry shook his head subtly.

"But, sir, Harry really does have detention, and Professor Snape is very strict –"

Harry's instincts alerted him to what was coming before anything else did; he cast Protego at the exact same moment as a jet of red light hit Blaise and he collapsed on the floor, a mildly surprised expression on his face.

Crouch's other Stunner bounced off of Harry's shield and smashed into the blackboard; Harry darted towards the exit, but Crouch's nonverbal spell got there first, warding the door.

"Mulco!" Harry fired, turning around quickly, but he didn't expect one Bludgeoning Curse to penetrate Crouch's shield, not really. Maybe a barrage of them would. "Mulco maximus! Protego!"

He dove behind a desk, putting a physical boundary between himself and his attacker.

The volley of Bludgeoning Curses made a clear impact against Crouch's shield, but he laughed as he deflected them and sent

another nonverbal spell at Harry; a Stunner, from what Harry could tell, he'd had a lot of those aimed at him in recent past –

“Ango!”

The Choking Curse had no more success than the Bludgeoning ones, but Moody's voice was savagely amused as Crouch said:

“You always were a precocious student, Potter – but you must know you can't win this fight.”

He punctuated that statement with a series of rapid-fire spells, the last one of which cracked the desk Harry was hiding behind. Harry didn't know what the fuck Crouch was casting, but that wasn't any different from his training, except that this time it was very much for real.

He needed something – fast, distracting, incapacitating.

With a quick Banishing Charm, he sent the remains of the desk flying at Crouch and threw a Vexo at the momentarily distracted man.

The curse actually hit its mark – Crouch had been thrown violently into the teacher's desk behind him, hitting it with a sickly crunch – but he rolled out of the way of Harry's opportunistic Expelliarmus and fired another curse Harry dodged.

“Protego,” Harry muttered. “Aspergo flamma!”

Crouch's robes caught gratifyingly on fire, but the man had chosen against battling the flames, as Harry had hoped – instead, he roared:

“Very well, Potter, if you want to fight like adults do, you'll get your wish!”

And that was it, Harry's one warning that the kid gloves were coming off now – and while it was great that he proved himself to be a tougher adversary than Crouch had envisaged, the prospect of an all-out duel sent him into a cold sweat.

“What the hell do you want with me?” he asked, hoping to maybe distract the man with conversation. “Segrego!”

Crouch swerved out of the way of the curse that could have dislocated his arm with agility surprising for a man on a wooden leg and fired a spell at Harry that sizzled as it went past his ear. At some point while Harry had been dodging, Crouch extinguished the flames on his person, but the smell of burning clothes still hung in the air.

“Don’t pretend you don’t know, Potter, I’ve seen it in your mind,” Crouch panted and aimed his wand again.

Harry dove behind another stack of desks, dragging Blaise’s body with him, because – fuck knew what might hit Blaise while he lay there incapacitated.

“Serpensortia,” Harry whispered. And then, in Parseltongue to the resultant snake: “Go bite that man. Now!”

Together with the snake, he sent another couple of desks and chairs flying at Moody – but Moody dispelled them with a broad swipe of his wand in the air, deflecting them back at Harry – Harry experienced a moment of blinding panic and fired an automatic Protego, hoping to stop the barrage of flying furniture from pummeling him and Blaise to death. The desks and chairs sailed past them and collapsed with a thundering noise. Harry’s shield faltered for a second, and Moody had curses flying at him – Harry dove to one side, but inadvertently strayed into the path of another.

Fuck, he thought, collapsing on the floor, his whole body bound together by writhing, coiling ropes. He tried to move, but the restraints only wound tighter. Now he was done for, fuck knew what would –

“Argh!” came Crouch’s cry from a little distance away. Harry could not see what was happening from his prone position on the floor, but he got his suspicions confirmed when Crouch continued: “No matter. I’ve got anti-venin in my chambers, and your little snake tricks won’t slow me down. Evanesco. Now...”

Moody’s face came into view, looming over Harry with a grin.

“Irritating little shit, aren’t you?” he asked conversationally. “No respect for your elders... although Master will teach you better manners, of course...”

The man gave a little laugh. Harry kept silent.

“Do you have any idea, Potter, how tempting it is to let my wand slip, my mind wander...” Crouch’s wand hovered just above Harry’s chest. “And perform an Unforgivable or two? I’m partial to the Cruciatus... although I hide it well.” He giggled, which was eerily at odds with Moody’s serious, battered face. “Bella didn’t hide it well, and she’s in Azkaban now. And I’m free... and helping my Master... but he does not want me to kill you.”

That last was said in an almost petulant tone. Harry’s brain was refusing to process everything, almost, because – “Master”? Crouch was –

“Master needs you whole and healthy on the summer solstice,” Crouch said, pouting. “I offered to kill you for him, but he has better plans... and then he will kill you,” Crouch promised. “And I will be rewarded... but now, I must stay hidden. I have not yet completed my mission... my missions... and you know something, I know you have found me out, I have seen it in your mind, the knowledge – Legilimens!”

Suddenly, it felt as if Harry’s head was breaking in two; images flashed before his eyes, images of recent past – he was talking to Millie in the Great Hall, he was with his friends in the Hidden Room, he was kissing Padma, he was examining the Map, he was doing research, he was casting spells, he was standing by the classroom, he was staring at the Map –

And then it stopped, except that the pain didn’t; dark spots were dancing before Harry’s eyes and he felt like throwing up.

“Oh, but you are the most tiresome child, Potter,” Crouch’s voice said and Harry opened his eyes, only then realising they had been closed.

“What – ”

“Now you deign to converse with me?” Crouch asked, a sneer in his tone. “It’s too late – I already know all I need to.”

With an immense effort, Harry raised his head to see what Crouch was doing; the restraints dug further into his arms, but he paid no heed. He saw Crouch holding Harry’s Defence textbook in his hands and smiling giddily.

“You won’t need this infernal Map anymore, Potter.” Crouch opened the book and stared at Harry’s handiwork. Then, he raised his wand and started muttering spells, probably trying to disengage the Map from the book.

“Are you working for Voldemort?” Harry asked, unable to contain the question.

It was the only thing that made sense, except that it didn’t make any sense, because Voldemort was – okay, maybe not dead, but certainly not alive –

“Don’t say the name!” Crouch raised his head and flicked his wand at Harry, scowling. “Don’t you dare say the name, you filthy halfblood. Saviour, they call you – soon, soon there will be nobody to save you.”

Well, didn’t that sound ominous.

Harry opened his mouth to ask about the real Moody, but found that he couldn’t talk. Fucking Crouch and his nonverbal spells.

“Finally!” Crouch cried in triumph.

Harry heard him move and, in a moment, Crouch came into view, towering over Harry. In his hand, he held the Marauder’s Map.

“I’ll find a good use for that,” Crouch said, smiling. The magical eye whirled to look at, or maybe through, the classroom wall. “And you and your little friend need to get going, or people will start to wonder...” Crouch’s wand, once again, hovered over Harry’s chest,

then moved up to touch his forehead. "You, Potter, are too curious for your own good. It is too early for you to see my Master's grand design."

Harry sensed what was coming; desperately, he tried to make his limbs move, to roll out of the way, to hide from the spell – but it was all for naught.

"Obliviate. Prodo deceptiones."

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"Well, Harry, you know I've been telling you to go to a teacher for a while," Hermione said approvingly at the next impromptu meeting in the Hidden Room. "I'm glad you've finally done it, because I really think we were getting in for over our heads here. I'm sure Professor Moody will know what to do."

"I'm a little surprised that Zabini went along with it," Anthony put in. "He wasn't for the idea, before."

"Yeah, well, Millie still thinks I shouldn't have done it." Harry shrugged and suppressed a wince at the motion. Honestly, the sixth year Slytherins must have been more brutal during the last practice than he'd thought, because he was bruised all over. "Blaise agrees, though, and he was there when I told Professor Moody. I mean, there was no sense in hiding stuff from him, not after the Map cleared him."

Neville shook his head.

"It seems a little too easy, somehow," he said, smiling ruefully. "It had been such a big deal, with us suspecting Professor Moody all of a sudden –"

"Yeah, um, sorry about that, the thing with the gillyweed book, I mean –"

"No, you were right," Neville hastened to interrupt. "I should have told you where I got it from, but I'm glad that Moody was only trying to



help you, in the end. I would have felt awful if he'd been trying to kill you through me, or something."

"Ah, shucks, it's gonna be weird to see you without your nose in that map all the time, Harry," Terry said, smiling.

Oh yes, Harry felt quite bereft without the Map. Grimacing, he thought that he'd refrain from telling the twins about his decision to give it to Moody – he had a feeling they wouldn't approve in the slightest. He was already beginning to regret it himself.

"Professor Moody will have much better use for the Map," Hermione asserted. "He said he'd show it to Professor Dumbledore, didn't he? They'll figure out something about Crouch very soon, you'll see."

Hermione's prediction came true in the sense that something did happen on the Crouch front, and something rather radical. A mere week after Harry gave Moody the Map, the Daily Prophet reported that Bartemius Crouch, Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation, had been found hanged in his own home, all clues pointing to suicide.

"Figured we were investigating him and got cold feet, I expect," Moody said to Harry's tentative questions. "You don't think I hung him up, do you, laddie?"

"Of course not, sir," Harry replied, but he was not so sure.

He had the nagging feeling that something wasn't quite right about this whole picture, but he couldn't put his finger on what was bothering him, exactly.

Crouch's suicide didn't stay on the front page for a long time, however, because juicier news replaced it: like Harry had feared, his breakup with Padma turned out to be highly entertaining material for the wizarding public. Rita Skeeter gleefully cast Harry in the role of a violent spurned lover; a couple of other journalists went the other way and made him out to be the victim. Padma had been bemused by the coverage in the beginning, but the further it got, the angrier she became; Terry whispered fearfully of hysterical outbursts in the

Ravenclaw Common Room. By the end of the first week, it could be gathered from the press that Harry was heartbroken, and had brutally dumped Padma, and her twin sister had been involved too, and now he was taking out his temper on younger students, and he cried every night, and Padma was afraid of him, or maybe it was Parvati (their names were treated as interchangeable synonyms). The Daily Prophet soon beat The Quibbler as far as inanity of their articles went.

("Don't worry, it's only a Wrackspurt that's got your brain. It will go away eventually.")

Harry had not complained to Luna – they weren't nearly close enough for him to let her in on his feelings. However, there was a certain serenity about her that Harry found appealing as of late, because even his other friends weren't immune to the furore around him and Padma. And, honestly, Neville's sympathy, mingled with pity, was in no way better than the twins' teasing. Harry got enough discussions on his life from the newspapers and other students; he understood why most his friends treated him with the caution of handling a time-delayed bomb, but it didn't make him feel calmer. Luna didn't seem to be aware of the rumours at all; she blabbered on about the nargle infestation at the Yule Ball and the mysterious properties of something called the Aged Solar Whisk, without a care to anything closer to home. And sometimes it was good to have a break from Blaise's pointed barbs, witty though they could be, and let Luna's nonsensical monologues wash over him.

Flying was another reprieve.

Harry bumped into Cedric a few times on the Quidditch pitch, when he'd gone flying to clear his head. The strain of the year left its marks on Cedric, too; the Hufflepuff lost some of his usual cheer and his smiles were obviously painted on for consumer benefit. Incongruously, he offered one of those automatic and painfully fake grins to Harry the first time they'd seen each other on the Quidditch field; it took Cedric a while to snap out of it while Harry stared at him in silence. Then, the grin slid off of Cedric's face, leaving behind a tired, slightly haunted expression.

("When I volunteered for this, I thought it would be more about the tasks and the glory, but we're up on a freak show without off time. I don't even know how you deal.")

They didn't have a Snitch to chase and made do with walnuts and golf balls for a couple of weeks until Krum came along, surly-looking as always, with his own Snitch and his own Firebolt. Cedric was hopelessly outclassed on his Nimbus, so they switched brooms around, to even the odds. Fleur was the only champion absent, but they never commented on it, like they never commented on the Tournament anymore, because this was not about the Tournament, or even about Quidditch. Just a Snitch, a sky, and a dash for freedom. The things none of them said would have been rendered empty by words, anyway. Words could only express so much, and there was certainly no vocabulary for the resentful sort of kinship they felt on account of the Tournament.

Too soon, Viktor's fan club followed after him, and suddenly their next pick-up game wasn't fun, but a three-way match covered by the Daily Prophet.

("Famously, Harry Potter passed the First Task by flying. One has to wonder to what extent Krum's jealousy prompted him to participate in the supposedly friendly match on Hogwarts grounds today...")

They never flew together after that again.

Besides, the Third Task inched inevitably closer; the Quidditch pitch was soon closed off, anyway. In the last week of May, Bagman showed the maze to Harry, Cedric, Viktor and Fleur, wand constantly by his nose to ward off flies of the muckheap nesting in his right nostril. The twins' curse was apparently still working – or maybe they were renewing it regularly. Harry was sure they had a lot of frustration to channel, especially with their brother Percy currently being under investigation for the Crouch suicide case.

In the month leading up to the task, Harry trained with unrelenting diligence – but, when the day came, he did not feel at all prepared, even if he tried to look his most confident as he walked into the maze after Cedric.

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Harry and Cedric stood before the Cup, staring at it. It had taken them a long while to get there and both sported numerous injuries – Harry’s worst and most recent came from their fight with the spider, but Cedric had been subjected to Viktor’s Cruciatus for a few seconds, which was a whole different level of disturbing. Harry was glad for taking his Invisibility Cloak into the maze with him – rules be damned, he didn’t want to catch the eye of a murderous Krum, so he’d Stunned the guy from where he stood a little way off, invisible, helped Cedric up and shot red sparks for someone to come and collect the unhinged Bulgarian. And now, after what felt like hours of wandering the maze and encountering weird shit, he and Cedric stood side by side and looked at the gleaming trophy which promised glory and worldwide recognition to the one who’d take it back.

Harry tried to put his weight on the injured leg and winced as it throbbed in pain.

“Go on, then,” he said, trying not to sound bitter. “Take the Cup.”

“No, you take it,” Cedric countered. “I wouldn’t have got past that Acromantula if not for you – ”

“Cedric, there’s no bloody way I’d beat you to the Cup if we both ran towards it, so just go on and take it, you’ve won it fair and square.”

“It’s not at all fair,” Cedric said firmly. “You got injured while helping me. You could have just left me.”

Harry rolled his eyes.

“Fine. How about we do it the Slytherin way, then – duel for it.”

“And that’s fair – how? You’re fourteen – ”

“Don’t write me off so quickly,” Harry warned. “The upper year Slytherins have been training me up all year, and I’ve learnt a thing or two.”

Cedric raised a sceptical eyebrow.

“Can you even duel with that leg?”

“Hold on a sec. Medeor!”

Sharp pain shot up his leg from the wound; Harry bit his lip as to avoid crying out.

“Harry!” Cedric reached out to steady him as he wobbled. “What are you doing?”

“Temporarily healing it,” Harry forced through a wave of pain. “Hurts like hell, but I’ll be mobile, though no marathon runner...”

“Aren’t such spells a little...” Cedric cast around for a word.

“They’re not Dark,” Harry protested. “They’re just – um, unconventional? Nothing bad, anyway, and dead useful.”

Cedric shook his head, not looking particularly convinced. Harry tried putting his weight on his leg, again, and sighed in relief, as it didn’t hurt all that much.

“All good,” he said. “Shall we, then?”

They settled into duelling stances a few feet away from each other – and boy, wasn’t it weird to face Cedric that way and know that this wasn’t a practice duel. Something actually depended on the outcome – they were competitors, now; not that Harry had ever seriously planned on winning the Cup, but if there was a chance he could win it in a fight, instead of just have it granted to him, he’d totally take it. After all, he might not need more fame, but winning the Triwizard Tournament would be fame of a rather different kind than just being the Boy-Who-Lived – it would prove that he was actually worth something, quite apart from the scar on his forehead.

“Expelliarmus,” Cedric fired, opening the duel.

Harry's shield was already up; the spell ricocheted off.

"Furunculus. Mulco. Stupefy!" he cast in quick succession, hoping that at least one of the spells would hit. "Protego!" he added hastily, as Cedric's own Stunners sailed at him.

There weren't any physical objects Harry could take cover behind; they were in an open clearing. This could prove... unfortunate.

"Katalambano," Harry cast, hoping to catch Cedric in magical restraints.

Cedric jumped out of the way, eyes a little wide.

"Commuto in tela," he incanted hurriedly. "Pello!"

His spells transfigured twigs on the ground into darts and Banished them at Harry. Harry's shield deflected them, but he didn't have time to fire another spell before Cedric sent a curse flying at him, this time nonverbally. Harry maintained his shield, but he didn't like this, didn't like being forced on the defensive –

He opted to dodge the next spell, so that he'd have the chance to fire a curse, and Cedric seemed to be transfiguring something else when Harry threw a Confringo and forced him to roll out of the way, abandoning whatever transfiguration he'd been cooking up.

Harry weighed the odds as his shield deflected the next curse. He was injured and beginning to tire, and Cedric was good, really good actually; Harry would probably not win if this went on for a long time. However, Harry could tell – could have told even before the duel started – that Cedric was one of those quintessential nice guys, who wouldn't expect any tricks and wouldn't pull any himself.

Harry didn't even think about it.

Jumping out of the way of the next curse, he wobbled intentionally, pretended to stumble on his wounded leg and give a sharp cry of pain.

And being a nice, noble, wholesome guy no matter what was at stake, Cedric hesitated.

It was only a fraction of a second, but Harry had been waiting for it – and he shot a Stunner before Cedric had the time to react.

Cedric fell, frozen, onto the ground.

Harry straightened, relief mingling with guilt in his chest. Pulling a trick on Cedric, who'd always been so kind to him, felt like betrayal, but – fuck it, all was fair in a fight. If you weren't mentally ready, you were screwed.

Harry walked over to Cedric and revived him.

"Constant vigilance," he said dryly.

The other boy only stared at Harry in silence, though, as if seeing a stranger.

"Look, I'm not sorry," Harry insisted. "You let your guard down during a duel, and it might have been a shitty thing of me to do, but you can't show weakness if you don't want it exploited – "

"Merlin, Harry, was the Cup so important to you?" Cedric asked and he sounded genuinely hurt.

Harry refused to back down.

"I would have done the same in any duel if I knew I couldn't defeat my opponent in a fair fight. You're too good for me, what did you expect me to do, sit back and admit defeat?"

"I don't know, but cheating is really not what I expected you to do."

"I didn't cheat," Harry stated, raising his chin. "I tricked you. If I pulled this stunt on Professor Moody, he would have taken that moment to disarm me, but you hesitated – "

“Whatever.” Cedric shook his head. “Just take the Cup and let’s get out of here. No,” he stressed, seeing Harry’s indecision, “we’re not having that discussion again. Whether you put your name in the Goblet or not, you’re going to win this Tournament, Harry. Congratulations. Now take the fucking Cup so that we can leave.”

Harry turned towards the trophy. This, right here, would be the end of his friendship with Cedric, whom he’d grown to like, damn it. Still, Harry didn’t think he would have behaved differently if he had to duel Cedric again – because he felt that he was right, that Cedric shouldn’t have left himself so open to be messed with, that maybe it was underhanded of him, but all that duelling honour crap was a luxury, it didn’t have place in a serious fight...

Throwing one last glance at the other boy, Harry reached with his hand and touched the Triwizard Cup. The last thing he saw before disappearing in a whirl of colour and sound was the shocked look on Cedric’s face.

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“Bertha, you have served the Master well, but we need you no longer... Master will have better servants soon. Avada Kedavra!”

Harry watched in panic as a jet of bright green light hit an empty-eyed woman who’d been stoking the fire under a large cauldron. She remained motionless on her knees for long moment and then fell sideways, like a marionette whose strings had been cut. Harry knew this woman: he had seen her in a dream, once, a horrifying nightmare he’d had last summer – only then she had been lying in a pool of blood, but now she was here, and alive, but already dead, and her killer was standing over her with a look of glee on his face – on Professor Moody’s face. And Moody’s face was suddenly shifting, morphing, twisting into that of the man Harry’d seen in that same dream – younger, less lined, with two perfectly healthy eyes. The magical eye popped out of its socket to roll onto the ground, and the wooden leg fell, unheeded, as a natural one grew in its place. Harry didn’t understand –



“Bone of the father, unknowingly given... Flesh of the servant, willingly given... Blood of the enemy, forcibly taken...”

Harry hadn't even felt the pain of the gash on his arm, not really, consumed as he was by the horror of what he was seeing – a shrivelled baby-like body in a cauldron, a man cutting off his own hand with a blissful expression on his face, and ohholyfuck this was Voldemort trying to come back – and Harry had seen this baby, he remembered this blackened, flaking skin, he'd been this baby in a dream once and just what the fuck was –

A tall, gaunt figure was rising out of the cauldron now, and Harry's scar erupted with pain greater than he'd ever felt before.

“Harry Potter! We meet at last... I hope you appreciate the honour of being one of the first to learn of my return.”

Harry was terrified out of his mind; his thoughts were racing and at the same time he didn't seem capable of thought at all, escape being his only and hopeless wish. And he couldn't help but cry out when Voldemort pressed a long pale finger to the curse scar – it had been aching like hell ever since he got to the graveyard, but this, now, was agony –

“My faithful Death Eaters... Some of you have been, of course, more faithful than others.”

And Harry felt sick as he learned, along with nine hooded figures who'd Apparated into the graveyard, how Voldemort encountered a nosy journalist in Albania, possessed her only to find that she held some invaluable information, and travelled back to England in her body. He learned how Voldemort went to free Barty Crouch Jr., Crouch's son, from the Imperius he'd been held under in his own home for years. He learned how Crouch Jr. helped Voldemort to acquire a rudimentary body – in the most sick and perverted way, as Harry knew from the nightmare that he was now sure had shown the truth. He learned how Crouch Jr. Polyjuiced into Mad-Eye Moody and put Harry's name in the Goblet. He learned how the Imperiused and brain-damaged Bertha Jorkins became their puppet, taking care of Voldemort's weak body. He learned how Crouch had been

deliberately helping Harry through the Tournament. He learned, finally, how the Portkey wards over Hogwarts would be lifted for the Triwizard winner, whom the Cup would transport to the audience – and how Crouch used that fact to subvert the Portkey, just so that this moment could happen –

“Summer solstice, the day of power and miraculous healing... There is nothing miraculous about my return; I have gone further than any other man to achieve immortality...”

Voldemort had planned, slowly and meticulously; he'd been patient. He knew that this ritual of rebirth needed to happen on the day of summer solstice, so he waited. He knew that, in the aftermath of the failed attack on Godric's Hollow, Dumbledore had retrieved his wand; he therefore sent his most trusted servant to Hogwarts – not only to sabotage the Tournament, but also to steal the wand from the Headmaster's office and bring it back. The plan might have taken a whole year to unfold, but it succeeded – and Voldemort did not appear to be a reckless man. He smiled coldly and spoke of immortality in the voice of a man assured of having an eternity ahead of him. A year did not matter on a grand scheme of things; he was here now, and he had Harry at his mercy now, and Harry really, really didn't want to die –

“Untie him, Bartemius, and give him his wand. Let us grant to the last Potter a chance to die fighting...”

And fuck, he couldn't hope to trick Voldemort into losing.

“We should bow to each other, Harry... I said, bow...”

“Protego!” Harry muttered, without thinking; the shield deflected whatever spell Voldemort had been aiming at him, no doubt to humiliate him further somehow –

“Crucio!” came Voldemort's enraged hiss, and Harry tried to dodge out of the way, knowing there was no blocking this curse, but it was too late and he fell, consumed by unbearable pain.

All his nerves caught on fire – it felt as if he was burning, and being cut, and his head would burst from agony, he could hardly think, he was surely, surely dying –

“Now, that was just a taste,” Voldemort said pleasantly from somewhere above Harry.

The pain ended, but the aftershocks still coursed through Harry’s body; Harry lay on the ground, panting and trying to collect himself.

“You don’t want me to torture you again, do you, Harry? Would you like me to just kill you with the next curse?”

Harry got up, slowly, gripping a gravestone to drag himself up. He tried to tune out Voldemort’s taunting and come up with any sort of a viable escape plan, if such a thing was at all possible, which it probably wasn’t –

“Answer me, Potter! Imperio!”

The pain from Harry’s injuries retreated; he was left with a nice, comfortable floating feeling. Everything was all right, or would be soon, if he only listened to the voice in his head.

Beg for your life, the voice urged silkily. Beg prettily, beg nicely, and maybe he will let you go.

The voice sounded very trustworthy, but Harry doubted it still, somehow.

Just say please, the voice spoke, more firmly. Say please, please no...

No, Harry thought, discomfited, there was something not right here – what was he supposed to be saying please about?

Just say it!

“No!” Harry cried out, harshly, and suddenly reality slammed back into him – he was at the graveyard again, wracked with pain, and the voice in his mind was gone, and everything was clear now –

Voldemort’s face was livid.

“No?” he asked, softly.

The Death Eaters, who had been jeering before, now fell almost fearfully silent.

“You dare defy me again, Harry?”

But Harry wasn’t interested in listening to him – he knew it wouldn’t be long now before Voldemort fired the third and final Unforgivable, and he wasn’t about to let it happen.

With a burst of strength, he darted behind the tomb he’d been tied to. He’d suddenly remembered – he still had his Invisibility Cloak with him, and if there was ever a need to use it, it was now –

A curse chipped the tombstone just above Harry’s head. Hastily, Harry took the Cloak from out of his pocket and put it on.

He couldn’t Apparate, and didn’t have a broom, but at least they wouldn’t see him now – the Invisibility Cloak covered him completely, and he’d silenced his steps with a whispered spell –

“Are you going to hide from me, Harry? Are you going to play the coward?”

The Death Eaters laughed; Harry gritted his teeth.

Cautiously, and almost forgetting to breathe from nervousness, Harry started creeping away. There were houses looming in the distance, some buildings, probably a village – a church was closest to the graveyard, so Harry figured he could maybe hide in it, or behind it, or something.

“This is getting tedious, Harry; come out from behind the tomb. I thought you would want to die in battle, with your head held high, not slaughtered like a snivelling child.”

You thought wrong, Harry snarled mentally. I don't want to die at all.

He was a good way away from Voldemort already, and nearing the fence separating the graveyard from the church, when he heard a noise that stilled his heart.

“Massster... he issss essssscaping, he isss invissible...”

Of course. The snake.

Harry made a few more cautious steps, looking around – he was in an open space, now, away from the tall tombstones.

“Your little charade is up, Potter,” Voldemort said, his voice very, very cold, and Harry somehow knew that Voldemort could now tell where he was.

He turned around, still under the Cloak, gripping his wand, but afraid to give himself away with a spell if Voldemort didn't yet know –

Voldemort remained where he had been, but he was facing Harry now and looking right at the spot where Harry stood, invisible. Pain burst forth from Harry's scar the moment his and Voldemort's eyes met.

“Avada Kedavra,” Harry whispered, feeling numb, wand aimed at those gleaming red eyes, and Voldemort laughed, his voice echoing eerily around the graveyard, as he stepped out of the way of pale green light.

Voldemort's own Killing Curse sped towards Harry. Harry dodged, rolled out of the way of another, still under the Cloak, clenching his teeth against the pain in his leg and his scar – and right there, with his cheek against budding young grass and dry soil, he realised, suddenly, without a trace of doubt, that he was going to die.

He was going to die, even though he was only fourteen, and had so much life yet to live and was not at all ready.

The Death Eaters and their taunts, the graveyard, the pain – all of it melted into the background, now. It was not important. The world became condensed to the rapid beating of Harry's heart, the smell of fresh night air and the magnetic pull of Voldemort's crimson eyes.

Harry was standing upright, still uselessly clutching the Invisibility Cloak over himself with frozen fingers, when the Dark Lord's Killing Curse hit him squarely in the chest.

He saw the bright green light, heard the soft rush of death.

Then, nothing.

Disclaimer: Oddly enough, Harry Potter does not belong to me.

A/N: My sincerest gratitude to my beta Gwendolyn.

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Awareness returned gradually.

First came the knowledge that he was; he did not know where or who he was, but he knew he existed.

He looked around in vague curiosity. There was an endless sea of white on all sides of him, but it seemed to be changing form the longer he looked at it, swirling clouds solidifying into shapes.

Just as a glimmer of understanding began to dawn – these archways, this domed ceiling, these columns, they were somehow familiar – he heard a voice calling out from behind him.

“Harry.”

Knowledge rammed into him before he’d finished turning; a little dizzy, he stared at two figures emerging from the mist.

“Mum?” They came closer still. “Dad?”

They smiled at him, the way they’d done a long time ago in the Mirror of Erised, and Harry swallowed past an obstruction in his throat.

“I’m dead,” he stated, more to himself than to them.

Harry’s father – tall, with messy hair, and slightly foggy glasses – reached him in two steps; Harry found himself engulfed in an embrace, his face pressed to his dad’s robes.

“Not quite,” James Potter said softly. “Not yet.”

Once he released Harry, Harry’s mum stepped forward; Harry saw, now, that she held a bundle in her arms. She handed it to James with a stern look, and he took it, grimacing.

“Oh Harry,” Lily said, as she swept him into a hug. “I love you,” she whispered into his ear, and her hair – a deep, warm red – tickled Harry’s nose.

She smelled like something long forgotten, like fresh dough and safety.

Harry nodded wordlessly into her shoulder, trying to rein in the tears gathered in his eyes.

“Let’s sit,” Harry’s mum said, wiping the dampness off of her own cheeks, and drew Harry towards a row of benches he had not noticed before.

She turned to James as they walked.

“Let me take it back,” she said and withdrew the bundle from her husband’s awkward hold.

“What is it?” Harry inquired.

Lily and James Potter exchanged glances. Then, without speaking, Lily lowered her arms.

Harry reeled back in shock and bumped into his dad, who steadied him by the shoulder.

“This is – ”

It was the horrible misshapen baby with flaky pigmented skin that Harry had seen Voldemort be before the rebirth ritual. Except that now, the baby was sleeping, a pained expression on its scrunched-up face.

Harry swallowed against his nausea.

“Why are you holding it?” he asked his mother, and was proud of the way his voice lacked hysterical notes.



"It's only a baby," she replied sadly. "I could not listen to it cry."

They sat down on a bench, Harry's parents on both sides of him. Harry kept stealing glances at the baby in his mother's arms; it unnerved him to see it so close to her.

"You didn't tell me what it was," he said hesitantly. "Why is it here?"

James sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

"I think it's best if we start at the beginning," he uttered.

"And when is that?"

There was a pause.

"The night we died," Lily said softly, not looking at Harry.

"No," James countered. "The night Trelawney gave the prophecy."

Harry listened, with mounting anxiety, as his parents narrated the tale of their own deaths and events leading up to it; the batty Divination professor – then only a candidate for the post – giving a prophecy that would seal Harry's future; the attack on Halloween; the protective power of Lily's sacrifice. Harry had known, from memories unearthed by the Dementors, what happened that night; he'd heard his mother's screams, his father's last words, Voldemort's high-pitched laugh – but he'd never thought, never imagined even in his darkest nightmares that he was the cause of it all.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, staring unseeingly into the distance. "He came for me. If not for me, you'd still be – "

"Don't say that," Lily implored, touching the back of Harry's hand to make him look at her. "Please don't say that. If I had that choice, today – I'd have done it again. I'd have taken the curse for you, today just as then. It is not your fault. Only Voldemort is to blame. I would always make the same choice."

"As would I," James added firmly.

“Yes, but if not for me – ”

“If not for Voldemort,” James corrected. “And if not for Voldemort, things would have been different altogether.”

Harry closed his eyes for several long moments, trying to calm his breathing. Neither Lily, nor James spoke, evidently giving him time.

When Harry opened his eyes, it was to check that his parents were still there.

“What did the prophecy say?” he asked finally.

Lily was the one to recite the words. They came out almost soothing, like a lullaby, only a twisted one, one promising death and pain before a hope of peaceful sleep. The power to vanquish, the Dark Lord as equal, and either must die, and neither can live...

“I’ve just died,” Harry said. “The prophecy is fulfilled.”

James and Lily remained silent. Harry bit his lip.

“Isn’t it?”

“It got complicated,” James pronounced, brown eyes serious, “because of Lily’s sacrifice.”

“I don’t understand,” Harry said.

The bundle in his mother’s arms gave a soft mewl; Harry jumped and threw it a belligerent look. James frowned.

“Do you want me to take it?” he asked Lily.

“It’s just a baby,” she repeated. “It’s okay.”

James shook his head, as if to jiggle his thoughts into a coherent arrangement.

"Look, Harry... this is not the sort of magic you're used to. Not the sort of swish-flick-whoosh, instant effect, established procedure stuff. It's... deeper magic, soul magic, where things get murky and nobody can really predict anything. It's... difficult to understand."

"But you do," Harry said.

"I'm dead," James explained. "That helps."

Lily hit James on the arm, reaching from behind Harry.

"Concentrate," she said. "We don't have much time."

"We don't?" Harry asked, alarmed.

"Depends which way you look at it," James said. "In earthly terms, we have no time at all. Now... when Lily died the way she did, she invoked deep, ancient magic. She gave you protection the likes of which nothing measures up to."

"And this is why Voldemort could not kill me?" Harry ascertained.

"That... is debatable," Lily said, tucking a strand of auburn hair behind her ear. "There is also the prophecy to think of, which promised that he would mark you as his equal. There were many forces at work here. And..."

Lily threw a glance at James. James looked at his shoes.

"Harry, this may be difficult to hear," he told them. "None of this is something anyone chose to let happen, but..."

"When Voldemort tried to kill you that night," Lily continued, forcing the last few words through with visible effort, "when the Killing Curse rebounded on him, a piece of his soul – it broke off. It sought the nearest living being to occupy and..." Lily clasped her hands and finished in a hushed voice: "It happened to be you."

Harry experienced a brief feeling of vertigo, like he was falling down very far and very fast. He looked from his mum to his dad, hoping to

see that he'd misunderstood something, that his mother hadn't just said what he thought she'd said - but they were both solemn, unsmiling. Serious.

"All this time... I've lived with Voldemort's soul inside mine?" he asked, very calmly.

"Not inside," James hurried to explain, seeing the look on Harry's face. "They did not mesh. It was in you, but it interacted with your own soul very little. Your Parseltongue abilities – "

"Came from Voldemort's soul in me?"

James winced.

"Well, yes."

And to think that Harry used to like his ability to talk to snakes, think it useful, special...

"Lily's sacrifice was also the reason why your soul and Voldemort's stayed separate," James said. "It kept a barrier between them, of sorts. After tonight, it would have started breaking down, but even then it would take years for your soul and Voldemort's to meld into one."

"Why would it start breaking down?" Harry asked. "Why after tonight? Because of the Killing Curse?"

"No," Lily said, and for the first time anger flashed in her bright green eyes. "Because Voldemort took your blood."

"Your blood carries the protection," James said, resting a hand on Lily's arm. "Now, it flows in Voldemort's veins. Your blood in his veins, his soul in your body... you see how complicated this is getting."

"Yes," Harry said hoarsely. "Are we – going to become the same person, or something, share minds, I don't know – how on earth am I supposed to defeat him if we're getting more and more the same?"

“Shh,” Lily said. She wrapped an arm around Harry and kissed his temple, the hideous baby balanced gently on her knee. “No, you’re never going to become the same person, of course not.”

“You might have shared minds, though, in a way,” James noted. “You had a link between you – the curse scar. You have received a glimpse into Voldemort’s mind through it, I believe.”

Harry thought of his summer nightmare and shuddered.

“Voldemort’s fragment of soul inside you was reaching out to Voldemort. For the same reason, your scar hurt next to him.”

“All right,” Harry said, although nothing was all right. “But what about – now? I mean, I’m here, and this is – ” he gestured at the shrivelled baby in his mother’s arms.

“And here is where it becomes even more complicated.” James nodded. “For many reasons. One of them being that, while you served as a sort of a... tether to life for Voldemort, carrying a piece of his soul in you, he is the same for you, now, because he took your blood.”

“Wait,” Harry begged, holding up a hand. “I don’t understand. The prophecy says, neither can live while the other survives, and now it seems that neither can die – ”

“Well, death is the other side of life,” James said, pragmatically. “Your life and death are tied to Voldemort through the prophecy.”

Harry didn’t like the sound of that.

“So – my blood in Voldemort’s veins is keeping me alive?”

“There are also two souls in you that could die,” James added. “Yours and Voldemort’s own, of which he has no idea.”

“And it’s his curse that tried to kill you,” Lily said darkly. “Him killing his own soul – well, it resulted in a bit of a loop, especially with your blood and my protection mixed in.”

Harry's head was starting to hurt.

"That is still keeping it relatively simple." Lily sighed. "There is also the fact that you were under the Invisibility Cloak when you died."

Harry raised his eyebrows.

"So what, Death couldn't see me?"

"That's right," James said, in all seriousness. "Death couldn't see you."

Harry stared.

"It's a very old legend," Lily informed him. "And the Cloak is a very old artefact. It had been passed down through James's family for generations, supposedly originating with its creator, Ignotus Peverell."

"Yeah, heard of him," Harry muttered.

"According to the legend, Ignotus hid from Death under this Cloak, and Death could not find him," Lily said. "He only died when he took the Cloak off and surrendered willingly. Now, it's probably half-myth, and I'm sure nobody has yet used the Cloak for surviving the Killing Curse – "

"But you're my son, and therefore special." James beamed. "The impact with the Curse, and the magics interwoven there, have probably destroyed the Cloak, though." James shrugged. "A worthy cause."

"Right," Harry said.

He thought of the times he'd sneaked around Hogwarts under the Cloak, safe under its protection. He thought of hiding under it tonight, of clutching it over himself as the last line of defence against Voldemort.

“And it’s midsummer,” James continued in the meanwhile. “Summer solstice. A very powerful day. There is a reason why Voldemort had chosen it to come back, because his ritual was not foolproof, either.”

“So – this is why I’m still alive,” Harry concluded, although it sounded more like a question. “All these – things – and I’m not dead.”

“Yes.” Lily’s smile radiated warmth. “Yes, and you could go back to life. More than that, you would be whole now. Voldemort’s soul...” she looked down at the bundle in her arms. “It would stay. You would be free of it.”

“I would not speak Parseltongue anymore,” Harry said, not sure how he meant it – as a good thing or a bad thing. It came out flat.

“You wouldn’t,” James agreed. “You would have no more visions, either, because the connection would be severed.”

“So... I go back,” Harry said, not letting these details distract him, “whole, without Voldemort’s soul in me this time, and live on.”

“Yes.”

His parents were nodding encouragingly.

“Or else I could stay here.”

James’s expression turned wary as he said:

“Yes.”

“With you.”

“Harry,” Lily said, eyes brimming with sadness. “Please don’t.”

Harry looked at his dad.

“We...” James ran a hand through his hair. “Kid, we’re not ready to have you die, not any more than you were before you got here. It’s... better that way.”

“But – if I stayed, I’d be here. With you.”

“Yes, but that’s all you would ever be.”

Harry looked at his hands, clasped in his lap.

It was tempting to imagine the perfect life he would lead here – something that he would never have back in reality, because the two people it centred around were dead.

But, if he stayed, knowing he could go back, the action would reek strongly of suicide.

But his parents were here. And he could stay with them.

But his dad was right, that was all he would ever be: here. This, here, was not life; his life would stop, it would end, and he’d have – this, instead.

But –

“I’d be going back to the prophecy,” Harry said, swallowing hard. “I’d be going back to Voldemort, and to the prophecy, and to having been killed.”

“Yes,” Lily whispered, drawing him into her shoulder. “Yes, sweetheart, it’s going to be difficult.”

Harry looked around the open space they were at, which had finally solidified into what Harry recognised as the Kings Cross station.

“You’re going to get on a train,” he said, suddenly certain.

“Yes.”

“And I... have to leave.”

Even quieter, now: “Yes.”



“How... I mean, Voldemort is there. How could I get away? Wouldn't I just – die again?”

“The Triwizard Cup is a Portkey,” Lily said urgently, looking into Harry's eyes. “It's a Portkey that's charmed both ways – ”

“Both - ?”

“Crouch subverted the Portkey to bring you away,” James explained. “The Cup was supposed to be one – from the maze to the audience. He probably saw no need to remove that, since it was easier to just tweak the Portkey instead of creating a new one.”

“Yeah... okay,” Harry said, dazed.

It seemed to him that everything sped up a little; the white mist stopped twirling, the scene before him was becoming more vague, and he heard the distinct whistle of a train...

“It's ending, isn't it?” he asked, looking between his parents. “I have to go, don't I?”

They stood up. Lily put the bundle from her arms down onto the bench and turned to face Harry, her brilliant eyes shining with tears – and something else, was it pride?

“Harry,” she said, taking his hand in hers, “whatever happens from now on... whatever happened in the past...” Her hand squeezed Harry's, then flew up to smooth his fringe away from his forehead, to touch his cheek. Her quick caresses were feather-soft, soothing. “Just never doubt that we love you. I wish we could be there for you, all these years, when Petunia...”

Lily swept a tear off her cheek, angrily, and then Harry found himself enveloped in her arms – and he hugged her back – maybe if he could just wish hard enough, she would stay forever –

James's hand landed on his shoulder, and Harry looked up into his eyes.

“The prophecy – this is not why we want you to go back,” James said, expression solemn. “You didn’t ask to be named in the prophecy, to save the world – and I don’t care what anyone says, nobody can expect you to. If you do... it’s your choice. I want you to go back because you have a chance to live. Live for yourself, not for some prophecy. Do you understand?”

Harry nodded, though he understood only that the scene was fading, that his time here was running out, and that he was about to lose his parents, all over again, and this time it would be by his own choice.

For a moment, he wanted to scream for it all to stop, to change his mind, to grasp at the fleeting images of a future that would never come to pass –

But he was slipping, and the world was blurring, and his parents were waving –

And it was already too late.

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Harry came to with his body sprawled on the ground, face pressed to hard soil. Its smell assaulted his nose, as his lungs took a deep breath; over the thunderous beating of his heart, he heard a rustle of cloaks in the distance, hushed exclamations exchanged between several people.

“Move away, Avery, let me help our Lord – ”

“You can’t tell me what to do, Crouch – ”

Harry swallowed, then opened his eyes.

He was alive.

He was alive, and his only chance to continue living was in reaching the Triwizard Cup that lay a long way away somewhere.

Raising his head slightly, Harry saw Death Eaters crowded around the prone body of the Dark Lord. Odd. It seemed as if he, too, fell when the curse hit Harry.

Voldemort was getting up, now, and there was no time to waste.

“Accio Cup,” Harry whispered, fingers tense around his wand. Then, he aimed it at the Death Eaters: “Fulmen!”

He shut his eyes against the blinding flash of light as Death Eaters screamed obscenities; he knew he got them. However, now they also knew –

“He’s alive!”

It was impossible to mistake the honest incredulity, horror and almost awe in that cry.

Harry opened his eyes to see Death Eaters looking around blindly, trying to spot him.

Voldemort, though... he hadn’t been caught by the charm, but he seemed momentarily frozen by the shock of seeing Harry alive, though his face reflected nothing. Then, he sent a spell frizzling towards Harry, and Harry rolled out of the way and lunged for the Cup that was sailing towards him in the air, swerving closer –

Voldemort fired a spell at the Cup, now, probably guessing Harry’s intent, but Harry’s frantic Protego had enough power behind it to block the spell before it hit, and then it didn’t matter any longer.

Harry’s hand closed on the Cup.

He clutched it, trying to stave off nausea, as the Portkey whirled him back to Hogwarts – or at least he hoped he’d be going to Hogwarts, that his parents were right –

His parents –

He slammed into the solid ground, disoriented, and there were screams from all sides, shouting his name and the news of his return.

Looking up, Harry saw Quidditch stands, redressed for the Third Task, people's worried faces, all blurring into one large blob, and the castle looming in the distance.

He was definitely at Hogwarts.

It was as if his body had been waiting just for that final confirmation to give out: suddenly, he felt very weak and very tired, like his bones weighed too much for him to carry. The Triwizard Cup dropped from his unfeeling fingers.

"Harry, my boy," a familiar voice said from beside him, "I cannot express how glad we all are to see you in good health."

Harry stifled a hysterical laugh. In good health? Is that what they called it these days, you were in good health if you'd managed to die –

"Voldemort," he rasped. "Voldemort – he's back. I saw him."

Dumbledore seemed grim, but not surprised.

"Then it is as we feared," he said. "Are you seriously injured, Harry? I see a wound on your arm. Do you think you can walk?"

"I – think so."

Dumbledore helped Harry up. Harry saw a cordon of Aurors closing off the area – briefly, he glimpsed Cedric trying to get through and being denied access. On the other hand, Cornelius Fudge, or someone who looked very much like him, was approaching Harry and Dumbledore.

"Now, see here – what do we have? Potter, what are you –"

"Cornelius," Dumbledore interrupted smoothly, "if you could continue your admirable handling of the situation here? I will question young

Harry on tonight's events and speak to you as soon as possible. In half an hour, perhaps? I am afraid the matters are most urgent."

"I – yes, but, very well – "

The Minister seemed no more certain what to do than the rest of the people around them, but he drew himself up and marched off, shouting orders at the Aurors.

"I want to go to the Hospital Wing," Harry said bluntly, as Dumbledore led him towards the castle.

Surely, he couldn't be expected to deal with any more shit tonight.

"The Hospital Wing is indeed our destination," Dumbledore said. "However, it is imperative that I hear the story of what had occurred tonight in order to begin marshalling our defences against it, as I'm sure you realise."

Time seemed to be playing tricks on Harry; they had only just got through the crowd of onlookers out on the pitch, but now he was already stumbling over the castle's stairs.

"I've told you all that was important," Harry forced out, trying to summon anger through the haze of his exhaustion. Anger was good. If he was angry, he wouldn't let himself go and shatter into a thousand pieces right here, in the Entrance Hall. "Voldemort is back, what else is there? Aren't you going to do something about it, tell the Minister, alert the press?"

"All in good time, Harry," Dumbledore promised. "For now, I must find out the manner in which tonight's events occurred, or else I shall remain uncertain as to my chosen course of action."

The Infirmary doors opened without prompting before Harry and Dumbledore; the nurse came out to meet them.

"Mr. Potter!" Her eyes widened at the sight of him. "What have you been doing to yourself? Oh my – the Headmaster! What can I – "

"We will require a quarter of an hour, Poppy," Dumbledore said, inclining his head politely. "After that, Mr. Potter is yours to treat."

"The boy needs immediate medical attention!" Madam Pomfrey insisted, but wilted under the force of Dumbledore's gaze. "Oh, very well. Quarter of an hour, and not a moment longer! I don't care what earth-shattering matters are being discussed!"

She retreated, huffing, into the room at the back of the Infirmary. Harry sat gingerly at one of the hospital beds; they were pristine white and he was covered in blood, sweat and dirt, and he had the absurd thought that Aunt Petunia would have a fit. And yet thinking of his aunt made him recall his parents, and he needed to move on from that thought before the lump in his throat made it impossible to speak.

Dumbledore seated himself on the bed opposite Harry's.

"Dear boy, I understand that this is a very trying time for you, but I really must ask – where did Barty Crouch's Portkey take you?"

"To a graveyard..." Harry began automatically, but then his mind caught up with the words – he hadn't even mentioned Crouch yet. "Wait, how do you – ?"

"Alastor finally broke through the Imperius tonight, at about the same time when young Diggory shot up red sparks," Dumbledore related sombrely. "Alastor informed us of Crouch's plan. You see, Crouch escaped Hogwarts earlier today and left real Alastor in his place – Professor Moody had to be present at the task, lest I grew suspicious. Crouch's attention must have wavered during the course of tonight, so Alastor broke the Imperius and told us of the plan. Cedric Diggory confirmed that you had indeed been taken somewhere by the Cup..."

"To a graveyard," Harry repeated, filling in the pause. He couldn't even think to relive the events by retelling them, so he spoke fast, doing his best not to listen to the words coming out of his mouth. "It took me to some graveyard, and Voldemort was there, and so was Crouch, and then there was this ceremony, with blood of the enemy and bone of the father, and he cut off his own hand and he was

happy about it, and then Voldemort was alive, and Death Eaters arrived, and he told the story and then we duelled – ”

“You did?” Dumbledore asked, leaning forward.

“Not really. He killed me.”

The Headmaster went still, eyes alert on Harry.

“And yet you seem perfectly alive, my boy,” he said at length.

“That would be because I am,” Harry retorted, tenuous hold on his temper slipping. “For a lot of reasons, and my Cloak is totally wrecked now, but you know what? I found out a lot of things that you haven’t told me, sir, and if you really want to talk to me instead of letting me get fixed up, you can tell me why you’ve kept silent about things that I know you knew.”

Somewhere in the distant part of his mind, he couldn’t believe he was talking to the man like that, but at the same time, what could Dumbledore really do? He wouldn’t kill the Boy-Who-Lived, and Harry had already died once tonight, anyway.

Besides, it was either this, or flying into outright hysteria.

“It is true that I have kept some information from you, Harry,” Dumbledore said. “However, please believe me when I say that everything I have done, I have done with your benefit in mind.”

“Because me facing Voldemort while unaware of the prophecy or his soul fragment inside me was really great,” Harry snarled. “Thanks – so much.”

He thought dimly, through his rage, that he’d managed to surprise Dumbledore again; the man’s face went blank for an instant, before the earnest expression returned.

“Rest assured, Harry, that you and I will discuss my decisions and the reasoning behind them at a later date. This conversation is too lengthy and important for us to have in a hurry, and I’m afraid the fine

Madam Pomfrey will evict me from her domain in very near future,” Dumbledore said with a smile.

Harry did not appreciate the attempt at lightening the atmosphere; he continued glaring at Dumbledore stonily. Dumbledore sighed.

“There are a few more questions I must ask about tonight’s events,” he said. “Those of immediate importance. Please do not think that I disregard your other concerns, but the information you can provide now might save lives.”

He let that sink in for a moment before continuing:

“Do you know the identities of any Death Eaters present at the graveyard? Could you tell me in greater detail what Voldemort said to them? And it might seem intrusive to you, but I must know – exactly how did your confrontation with Voldemort unfold?”

And Dumbledore stood firm, and looked into Harry’s eyes as if scanning him with an x-ray machine, and Harry was too damn tired and incoherent and incapable of evading Dumbledore’s verbal traps right now. He hated to tell Dumbledore about the meeting with his parents, but in the end it proved necessary, because it was apparently a big deal whether or not Voldemort knew the full prophecy and whether or not he was aware of his soul fragment inside Harry. Harry still reduced the meeting to a few bare facts – parents, soul fragment, prophecy – but by the end he felt like he’d physically assault Dumbledore if the man asked a single question more.

When Dumbledore finally left, Harry remained sitting on the hospital bed, completely wrung out.

“Mr. Potter!” Madam Pomfrey cried, bustling back into the room. “At last!”

She did a scan of his injuries and gasped when the full extent of the damage showed up; the Killing Curse, in particular, left a new scar on Harry’s chest that the matron had blatantly no idea what to do with. She muttered to herself in frustration about the dangers the students



were being exposed to as she applied salves and healing spells to Harry's wounds.

"Your friends wish to see you, but I absolutely forbid it," she told him in a voice that clearly disapproved of friends in general. "You are in no fit state to be receiving visitors – drink this." She handed him a potion. "Now, go to sleep and give your body a chance to recover."

Harry complied, only too ready to say goodbye to reality and fall into a slumber. Perhaps, then he could forget for a while that he had actually died tonight, that Voldemort was back and that everything would be different now, forever.

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Harry was looking out of the infirmary window. He watched the play of sun and shadow on the leaves of a tree nearby; if he opened the window and extended a hand, he'd be able to touch those leaves, which were sometimes a dark, forest green, sometimes golden in the light, and if the sun shone just so, the leaves were an impossible shade of emerald...

There were things Harry could compare that colour to, but didn't, because that would just stir up the ghosts he was trying to put to rest.

In that regard, his forced confinement to the Hospital Wing was a blessing; Harry wasn't ready to go out and meet the school, the press, the Ministry without knowing what he thought about anything. There were decisions to be made, and conclusions to be drawn, and dice... well, never mind that; the die had already been cast, although Harry's hand had been forced there, somewhat. Certain things had been taken out of his hands before he was even born, but others he could still determine for himself.

He'd chosen, back at the ephemeral Kings Cross station, to have a future.

He'd always just... lived, before. He'd taken his being alive for granted and just lived, without thinking too much of the future or inquiring too deeply about the past. He now knew it had been a

mistake; he'd let others determine what he knew of his past, and his past was hiding things that dictated his future. Blaming Dumbledore for that was as tempting as it was impossible: Dumbledore had not told Harry anything, but Harry had never asked, either. In a similar vein, Voldemort made it his goal to kill Harry, but the continuation of their struggle would be just as much Harry's doing, because Harry had chosen to come back – at the urging of his parents, yes, but he'd chosen to return in full awareness of what he would be facing.

Voldemort was a part of the future Harry had chosen to face.

He and Voldemort were inextricably linked – Harry had known this, instinctively, for a long time. Ever since second year, he'd felt delicate threads of destiny connecting himself and Tom Riddle; the prophecy explained things, but changed nothing. Righteous rage or thirst for revenge were far from Harry's mind as he looked into his future. Instead, he was filled with the cold certainty that he would have to fight Voldemort – sooner or later, in one form or another, it would inevitably happen. Harry would not be free to live his life until he cut Voldemort out of existence, until their lives and deaths stopped revolving around each other, until he was unencumbered by prophetic bonds.

He didn't want to die again. Lying awake in the early hours of next morning, before the sun rose and the sky was still the dull grey colour of unwashed linen, Harry promised to himself that Voldemort would be the one dying the next time.

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"Merlin, Harry, I'm so sorry," were Cedric's first words.

Incidentally, Cedric was also Harry's first visitor the next day. Perhaps, Harry should not have been so surprised to see him, considering that he did vaguely recall seeing Cedric, ashen-faced and desperate, when he'd returned from the graveyard that night.

"What are you sorry for?" Harry asked cautiously.

“For the Cup! I basically made you take it and then you disappeared for an hour and then you looked half-dead and all bloody – ”

“I’m sorry, too,” Harry said, “for the way I ended up taking it. But it’s not your fault that I took it.”

Cedric shook his head and sat down next to Harry’s bed.

“Where did it Portkey you to?” he asked quietly.

And Harry had to decide, here, whether he wanted to tell his friends the truth. Because he really didn’t want to talk about it – ever again – but it wasn’t the kind of news he could keep to himself. His friends needed to know. The world needed to know. This was beyond Harry’s sensitivities; Dumbledore was right, this could save lives.

“Voldemort,” he said in the end, after what felt like an eternity of gazing at the white sheets on his bed. “It took me to Voldemort.”

He gave Cedric a brief summary of what had happened, already imagining the way he’d have to repeat it time and time again, to all his friends and then maybe to some strangers. He skipped the whole meeting with his parents, as well as the information revealed therein; he was not yet ready to confess to the prophecy, or to having served as a vessel to Voldemort’s soul fragment. He related his story without glancing at Cedric once, afraid to see disbelief written on his face – or rejection, like that night.

(“Cheating is not what I expected you to do...”)

There was silence after he’d finished. Then Cedric said, in a strangled whisper:

“It could have been either one of us...”

And Harry started, because that had not occurred to him before. Because, despite however traumatising the experience had been, Harry could see the logic of Voldemort choosing him for use in this particular ritual. Harry Potter had been Voldemort’s downfall – well, he’d be his resurrection, too.

What if Cedric had won that duel, as he should have?

Voldemort might have taken Cedric's blood, but then Cedric would die, Harry's mind supplied. Voldemort would probably not have given Cedric back his wand. And there was no prophecy, no soul fragments and no blood protection between Cedric and Voldemort; Cedric would have been dead by that Killing Curse, irreversibly, and his corpse would have stayed to rot next to the grave of Tom Riddle, Sr.

Harry shuddered, and it was sick to even consider it, but maybe it had to be Harry there, at that graveyard, in the end.

On a more educational note, Cedric filled Harry in on what had taken place while he was gone. As soon as Harry disappeared, Cedric sent up red sparks; everyone had been expecting Harry to appear in front of the crowds, because the Cup was meant to be a Portkey. Minutes passed; Harry failed to show. Then, Mad-Eye Moody went into convulsions and started spouting really strange things, and Cedric might have panicked a little bit, because his memories weren't very clear, but he did remember Fred Weasley clocking him in the face with the question of what he'd done to Harry. There was general commotion when it became blatantly obvious that something had gone dreadfully wrong with the task; Viktor Krum came out from under the Imperius, Fleur Delacour was suffering the after-effects of the Cruciatus, and Aurors were called onto the scene.

"And what are people saying now?" Harry inquired cautiously.

Cedric shrugged.

"They're speculating, but there's been no official explanation of anything," he said. "There was a small article in the Prophet about a disturbance at the Tournament. The Ministry's keeping mum. Dumbledore's made no announcement. Karkaroff is gone, nobody explains that, either. Everyone gets it that something huge has happened, but the lack of information is setting people on edge."

"Karkaroff is gone?" Harry repeated.

“Running from Voldemort, judging by what you said.” Cedric nodded. “Viktor looks like he’ll kill the next person who asks him a question, Fleur hasn’t been seen.”

“And what about you? Aren’t people asking you questions?”

Cedric buried his face in his hands with a groan.

“Don’t remind me. I don’t even know what to say, because up until now I only knew that you disappeared – do you...” He raised his eyes. “Do you want me to tell others about You-Know-Who and all?”

Harry sighed.

“Yeah, just don’t go into details,” he said. “They need to know, especially if nobody else is telling them anything...”

“I’ve spoken to my dad,” Cedric said. “It seems that he’s been under some pressure to keep me quiet about what I’ve seen. He’s having none of it, of course, but I think the Ministry might want to hush things up.”

Harry frowned.

“Great. I guess there’s only that much the Ministry can hush up, though,” he mused. “I mean, if everyone knew things went wrong, and Aurors were called, and the champions gave their evidence...”

“Yeah, and foreign newspapers are writing about it,” Cedric said. “So we’ll see what happens. I’ll spread the word, anyway.”

Harry’s prediction about having to tell the story many times came true, of course – all his friends poured into the Infirmary to visit him, each worried and wishing to know what on earth had happened. Neville had been wide-eyed and pale, Terry and Anthony serious, Hermione openly sympathetic. The twins tried for nonchalance; Luna did a better impression of it seemingly without trying. The first time Harry had been asked about Sirius Black’s presence among the Death Eaters, he didn’t know what they were talking about.

“What? No, Sirius Black is innocent. He’s never been a Death Eater. He killed the man really responsible for betraying my parents and escaped from Britain. I don’t know where he is, but he has nothing to do with this.”

And everyone stared at him in amazement, but Harry only shrugged it off. His anger at Sirius Black seemed distant and inconsequential now; in the light of recent events, he couldn’t recall why it was supposed to be a big deal.

Hagrid showed up and nearly crushed Harry’s ribs in a hug. Padma came, too, and was uncharacteristically solemn as she listened. She seemed to be evaluating everything, weighing Harry’s story, and her dark eyes were observant as she took in the briefest flashes of emotion on Harry’s face. She surprised Harry by saying quietly:

“This changes everything, doesn’t it? You’re going to need as many people on your side as you can have.” And then, with a hint of her usual fickleness: “Good thing I’m so charming, I’ll bring lots of converts.”

In the end, Harry learned most from the way Blaise and Millie had treated him. They were watchful and quietly supportive, careful not to say too much, and their cautious attitude told Harry volumes about the mood in Slytherin. Incidentally, all of Harry’s non-Slytherin friends warned him against returning to ‘that pit of snakes’ – after all, Slytherin was widely associated with Death Eater connections. There was no doubt in anyone’s mind that Harry would be in danger there; Terry suggested a re-Sorting in a joking tone, but his eyes betrayed his seriousness.

“I’m a Slytherin, too,” Harry answered to all such claims. “I won’t be scared away from my own House. They’ll just have to deal with it.”

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And yet, he wasn’t all that sure of himself when he opened the door and stepped into the Slytherin Common Room.

There was an instant hush; the moment he walked in, conversations died down and people turned to stare. Before Harry'd managed to take a few steps towards his usual seat, a solid wall of students materialised in front of him, blocking his way and holding him in a semi-circle. Harry glanced around and saw Malfoy's gleeful face, Bletchley's frown, and the inscrutable expressions of Blaise and Millicent. They did not rush forward to defend him; they stayed there, with the group, waiting for him to prove himself – or else sink. They weren't on his ship unless they knew for sure it would weather the first serious storm.

Well. He'd been expecting something like this; bring it on, then.

Harry raised his chin defiantly, leaned back against the wall and smiled with aplomb he did not feel.

"So, Potter, care to tell us what happened during the Third Task?"

Montague threw the first question. Perhaps he'd been appointed the spokesman; perhaps he was just more impatient than others.

"Odd that you should ask," Harry said. "As it happened, Voldemort and I had a little chat. I suppose some of you," a pointed glance at Malfoy, "already know this from your parents."

"Bullshit!" someone shouted.

A ripple of angry mutters went through the crowd.

"Your story is bullshit," declared a seventh year Harry vaguely knew by sight. "If you'd met the Dark Lord, you wouldn't still be alive."

People were nodding in agreement. Harry gathered his mental focus to stay impassive through the next bit.

"What made you think he wanted to kill me?"

Naturally, a general outcry followed.

"Of course he'd want to kill you!"

“You’re the Boy-Who-Bloody-Lived!”

“You wouldn’t stand a chance!”

“Yes, I’m the Boy-Who-Lived,” Harry asserted, once the shouts quieted down a bit. “I’m special, aren’t I? Voldemort knows this better than anyone. How can you be sure,” and here he made a dramatic pause, “that Voldemort wouldn’t want me to join him?”

“That’s wrong!” Crabbe was shaking his head in bewilderment. “My father said the Dark Lord killed you and– ”

“Vince”, Malfoy hissed in warning, but it was too late – and made worse by Goyle’s supportive:

“Yeah, and you didn’t die!”

The crowd of Slytherins erupted in murmurs: suddenly, Harry’s story was confirmed by an unexpected source.

“Wait, so you mean You-Know-Who is actually back?”

“Potter is making it all up,” Malfoy insisted, but the cat was out of the bag, now.

“Was it supposed to be a secret?” Goyle wondered loudly.

“I thought we were happy that the Dark Lord is back!” Crabbe agreed.

“No, you morons, you were meant to keep your mouths shut!” Lavinia Yaxley snapped, furious.

Harry welcomed the pandemonium that ensued; he had a few moments to sigh in relief and compose himself again. Saying those words, claiming that he had Voldemort’s favour, left a foul taste in his mouth. He had been hoping that someone would contradict him – he’d actually thought it’d be Malfoy, but the blond was apparently smarter than he appeared – and he didn’t quite know where he’d take his charade if the plan flopped. He just knew that he had to fight for



influence in Slytherin, all over again, and that it'd be pretty damn hard to do with Death Eaters' children rising in power.

The crowd was no longer blocking Harry's way in a neat semi-circle; people were milling about and chattering anxiously, so Harry could, if he wanted, make his way through. However, that was not how he needed this to happen.

He wouldn't sneak around unnoticed. He had to show that he had the right to walk with the rest of them.

"How did you escape, Potter, if You-Know-Who was really there?" someone shouted.

"They're saying you survived the Killing Curse again!"

"Is it true that You-Know-Who killed you and you didn't die?"

This was such a circus. And Harry was walking the fucking tightrope.

He braced himself for his next act.

He waited until most of the noise died down and people turned towards him, eager to hear him answer those questions. Harry raised his head high, stepped forward and spread his arms in affected guilelessness.

"How did I survive? Well, that's for me to know and for you to find out. But hey, I've told you, haven't I? I'm special."

He cocked his head to the side and smirked.

It kind of felt like the smirk could fall off his face any second, like a physical mask, but he hoped the glue would hold for a while longer. Losing his cool now would mean throwing himself to the sharks. If he managed to hold it, though – he might still count a victory here.

"You are so full of shit, Potter," Bletchley said, and it came out a little awed.

Like Bletchley was trying to mentally encompass just how full of it Harry was, but couldn't put his audacity into words.

"Whatever you say, Miles." Harry was pretty sure the worst was over, now; the crowd was too divided to lynch him and he knew his performance had impressed some people. "And you," he rounded on some unfortunate second-years, "are standing in my way. So do me a favour and get lost."

The kids had clearly not expected the force of an angry Harry Potter to be unleashed on them; they scrambled out of his way, wide-eyed, and Harry proceeded calmly to his couch by the fire. The upholstery snakes seemed to sense his agitation; they slithered towards him and hissed, not that Harry could understand what they were saying. Thank fuck they didn't turn on him now that he lost the ability to speak Parseltongue; he'd completely forgotten to worry about that.

Millie and Blaise came up to Harry, then. It was safe now, wasn't it? He'd fought for his place under the sun and won himself a spot, so now they could join him.

"Hey, Harry," Blaise said, flopping down on the couch.

No matter how relaxed he tried to seem, his unease was palpable, and the same could be said of Millie.

Huh. Harry could play with that.

"Buddies again now, are we?" he asked, raising an eyebrow. "Thanks for the help, by the way."

"You wouldn't be worth much if you needed our help," Millie said coolly.

"That so?" Harry was almost interested to hear this, now.

Blaise was looking between Harry and Millie in mild alarm.

"This is your war to fight, Potter," Millicent snapped. "I won't be backing the wrong side. If you can't take on a bunch of kids..."

“Huh. That even makes sense, in a twisted kind of way.” Harry shrugged. “But what if I need a break sometimes?”

“Then go and hug a Hufflepuff.”

Harry snorted.

“Fine then. Tough love, I get it. Just don’t go expecting roses for next Valentine’s.”

And yet, by coming up openly to him now, Blaise and Millie had thrown their lot in with him; their actions had sent a clear message to everyone in the Common Room. Considering to whom some eyes and ears here would be reporting, it was a pretty bold statement indeed.

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“Ah, Harry, do come in. I dare say I am relieved to see you recovered from your recent ordeal.”

Dumbledore was sitting behind his desk and smiling benevolently. His phoenix dozed on a perch next to the window; portraits of former headmasters pretended to snooze, but Harry could see quite a few of them taking an interested peek at him.

“Please sit down.” Dumbledore gestured at a chintz chair.

Harry complied, feeling somewhat off-balance. He couldn’t help remembering that, the last time they talked, he’d shouted his head off at Dumbledore instead of behaving like a civilized human being, mitigating factors notwithstanding.

“Tea?”

“No, thank you, sir. What did you want to talk to me about?”

Dumbledore took a sweet from a bowl by his elbow. His bright blue eyes seemed to be carefully cataloguing Harry’s appearance.

"I believe I have promised to have an honest discussion with you, Harry," the Headmaster said. When Harry nodded, he continued: "You charged me with concealing information from you. I give you my word, Harry – the only reason why I had not informed you of the prophecy was because I did not wish to burden you with it. You were so young..."

"I would have preferred to know," Harry said firmly.

Dumbledore shook his head.

"Perhaps I should have told you, but I did not wish to add to your worries," he said. "I looked at you, as a first year, struggling to make a life for yourself in Slytherin, and thought that, surely, it was not essential for you to know of the prophecy yet. The following year, I had the perfect opportunity to tell you. You were in my office, the conversation could easily turn to Voldemort... but again, I hesitated. You were exhausted, you were scarred, you had just battled a deadly creature and emerged victorious. What good would it do to trouble you with that knowledge?"

Harry remembered his self-doubt after the trip to the Chamber of Secrets, his worries and fears. If he had discovered then that there was a prophecy connecting him and the Dark Lord... well, perhaps he would have breathed easier for knowing there was a reason, however twisted, for the numerous similarities between himself and Tom Riddle. Not to mention –

"The fragment of Voldemort's soul inside me – you knew about it," Harry accused.

Dumbledore sighed.

"I merely suspected," he said. "I could not know, but I suspected that you and Voldemort might be connected more deeply than anybody understood. You possessed a most curious scar, the aura of which... I had my suspicions. I had no proof, however. I chose not to distress you with my speculations."

“Was it really your place to choose for me? It’s my life, I should have known what to expect, I should not have been walking into Voldemort’s trap blind – ”

Dumbledore inclined his head.

“You are right in that I have, perhaps, delayed telling you for too long. I admit, I could not stand to burden you with this responsibility earlier than was absolutely necessary.”

Harry frowned. It was true that he’d been happier not knowing, but ignoring the problem would not make it go away. Still, if he’d been in Dumbledore’s place – would he have told himself?

“I do understand,” he said quietly. “But – Professor, please stop withholding information from me from now on. I would rather know the truth, whatever it is.”

“I shall endeavour to do my best in that regard.” Dumbledore smiled – and, with a sinking heart, Harry saw in his expression that it would not end here.

Dumbledore would keep hiding things, was still hiding things, and he would not part with the information until he deemed it appropriate.

Harry clenched his jaws in anger. He wasn’t asking for secrets that didn’t concern him! He wasn’t asking out of idle curiosity, but the war did concern him, anything to do with Voldemort concerned him, and god help Dumbledore if he was still hiding something about Harry personally. He’d done enough stumbling around in the dark already!

“I imagine you have questions, Harry,” Dumbledore said, changing the subject. “You have not asked about the prophecy.”

Harry had had plenty of time to consider the prophecy and its various meanings while he stayed in the Infirmary, alone with his thoughts. The one thing that really made him wonder was –

“It says I have a power the Dark Lord knows not?”

That, at least, was good news. Over the last few days, Harry'd tried to imagine all kinds of great powers he might possess, even though none manifested.

Dumbledore seemed to be actually pleased by the question.

"And this power has already let you survive Voldemort's attacks twice," he said. "Your parents told you of Lily's sacrifice, I believe..."

"Yes," Harry muttered.

"Then you know that your mother's willing sacrifice created a shield of love that made the Killing Curse rebound off of you. Her sacrifice outlasted that night; the wards on your house at Privet Drive are powered by her love and maintained by the presence of her blood relative, your aunt."

Harry blinked. So this was why he stayed with the Dursleys; he'd wondered. Still –

"I'm sorry, sir, but how does this relate to the power the Dark Lord knows not?"

"Unlike Lord Voldemort, Harry, you possess the ability to love."

Harry waited. When no elaboration was forthcoming, he ventured:

"Sir, you believe that the power the Dark Lord knows not is love?"

"Yes, Harry." Dumbledore nodded, as if happy that Harry had caught on so quickly.

Harry stared.

"Love," he repeated, just to make sure. "What will win us this war, my ultimate weapon... love?"

"Yes."

“I’m sorry, Professor, but did you defeat Grindelwald with the power of love, too?”

Oddly, Dumbledore went a little pale at that. However, he overcame the weakness quickly and, in the next moment, was already smiling at Harry in his usual benevolent way.

“That’s a tale for another time, Harry. For now, I would like to warn you against taking the power of love too lightly. You, whose entire existence is sustained by it, must know of the power love holds. Voldemort, who neither understands nor values love, has been thwarted twice by it. It is your greatest asset, Harry.”

“If you say so, Professor,” Harry said dubiously. “But shouldn’t I get some sort of training? Now that Voldemort is back and he will want to kill me – ”

“It is not your duelling skills that will defeat Voldemort,” Dumbledore said firmly, “but the strength of your whole, pure soul against his.”

And Dumbledore seemed really convinced of this: that love was the only possible answer. In a roundabout, gentle fashion he told Harry that it was unrealistic to expect the prophesised saviour to become Voldemort’s equal in skill and power quickly enough; Voldemort had decades of experience on Harry, and they could hardly wait for Harry to catch up – the world would be doomed in the meanwhile. No, Harry’s true might and the world’s hope apparently lay in his ability to love, in the purity of his spirit and the strength of his soul.

Except that Harry couldn’t help thinking that Dumbledore knew him very little if he considered him to be a loving, kind-hearted, noble-spirited individual.

Harry walked out of Dumbledore’s office secure in the belief that he couldn’t afford to rely on anyone, entirely. Then again, he hadn’t been planning to. The conversation with Dumbledore had been disappointing, but Harry would be foolish to make an enemy out of the man; Dumbledore had, after all, defeated a Dark Lord in his time, played a significant part in the first war against Voldemort and was an immensely powerful wizard besides. Harry could not hope to rush into

battle at fourteen and expect Voldemort to fall defeated; determination alone was not enough – Harry needed knowledge, and experience, and support. He'd take it where he could get it. Following anyone blindly, on the other hand, was definitely not on his agenda.

"Potter! A word, if you don't mind."

Harry turned around, warily; there, a few feet away from him in the hallway, stood Mad-Eye Moody. Last time Harry'd seen Moody, his face had been morphing into that of Barty Crouch Jr. It did not invoke pleasant memories.

"Professor?"

Moody snorted.

"I've never been your professor, lad. Haven't taught a day in this school – but you know all about it, don't you?"

Now that Harry was looking closer, he saw that Moody's magical eye did not seem to be magical at all; it was a static glass prosthetic. Moody must have noticed Harry's stare, because he said:

"Crouch buggered off with my eye, and they still haven't got a replacement ready for me. Tricky things to make, these magical eyes. The leg, that's easy. They fixed it right up while I stayed at St. Mungo's."

"Right," Harry said.

"Don't trust me worth damn, do you?" Moody gave a mirthless laugh. "I'm not blaming you, Potter – it's actually what I wanted to talk to you about."

Moody put one hand in a pocket and extracted a piece of parchment that was achingly familiar to Harry. Harry's eyes widened.

"Thought you'd recognise it," Moody said. "Here. I'm leaving, so I've no use for it. You might as well have it back."



Harry walked over and took the Marauder's Map into his hands, barely able to believe what was happening.

"Why do you have it, sir? I thought that Crouch – "

"Crouch needed it to escape Hogwarts before the Third Task," Moody interrupted. "He needed to get to the graveyard ahead of time, so he had me lead him out with the Map in hand, and then I used the Map to return to my quarters without anyone seeing me. All under the Imperius, of course." Moody grimaced.

"Thank you for returning it to me, sir," Harry said.

He'd thought the Map, just like the Cloak, irretrievably lost. While he now had memories of his parents replacing these relics of them, he had still been upset to lose both artefacts.

"That's not quite all," Moody said, when Harry was turning to leave. "There's something that you don't know – but you should."

Moody looked around, to check that nobody was there, but he needn't have bothered; the castle was almost empty, with everyone enjoying the warm day outside.

"You didn't trust Crouch," Moody said, his voice low. "You didn't give him this map voluntarily."

"I'm sorry?"

"You've been Obliviated," Moody stated bluntly. "I don't know the particulars, because Crouch only told me that much, and that mostly through cursing at you – but you'd figured him out, Potter. You used this map and figured him out, but he caught you at it. You duelled. He won."

Harry clenched his fists.

"Is there any way for me to recover the memory?"

"Not unless you want your mind broken."

Harry remembered the bruises he'd sported that day, Blaise's strange acceptance of his decision to trust Moody, and his own unease at parting with the Map. He felt unclean, knowing that his mind had been tampered with – he hated the thought that someone had removed his memory – he'd make that Crouch bastard pay when he got his hands on him.

"If you're thinking of vengeance, give it up, lad," Moody advised suddenly. "Because Barty Crouch Jr. is mine."

And here Moody gave a truly feral smile that Harry returned with satisfaction.

It was good to know that not everyone on this blasted good side planned to defeat their enemies with the power of love.

xXxXx

Thankfully, there was only a week between the Third Task and the departure from Hogwarts, three days of which Harry'd spent in the Hospital Wing. With everything that had happened, just living, day to day, hadn't been so hard for him ever before. He existed in the state of constant tension, knowing that he could not afford to show weakness; not in front of the press, not in front of the teachers, not in front of the students. It was incredibly taxing to act calm and collected all the time, but Harry was sure, and he revelled in this knowledge, that most of the students he came across saw only his strength, his confidence, his – dare he say it – power.

Harry Potter was, after all, the winner of the Triwizard Tournament. Nobody knew that Harry's success was the work of a Death Eater; they beheld, instead, a fourteen-year-old boy who'd defeated formidable opponents. It was no wonder, people whispered; he was the Boy-Who-Lived. Of course nobody else stood a chance; after all, Harry Potter was a legend. There had to be a reason why You-Know-Who failed when he tried to kill him. And did you hear? They say You-Know-Who tried to kill him again and the Killing Curse didn't work!

"How many people actually believe that, do you think?" Harry asked, staring at the lake unseeingly.

"More than you imagine," Luna answered.

Her hands worked at making a wreath of some purple flowers. Harry glanced at them and absently picked up a stray petal.

"But I mean, why would they? After a year of Rita's bullshit, I come up with an outrageous story and can't offer any proof..."

Luna looked at him seriously and laid her wreath aside.

"Your friend Hermione Granger has the same problem," she said.

"Huh?"

"Do you remember when you introduced us and she did not believe me about the Blibbering Humdingers?"

"Yeah."

That had been an awkward conversation.

"Hermione limits magic to simple cause and effect," Luna explained. When Harry still didn't understand, she continued: "You do it too, though a little less. Maybe it is because you have lived among Muggles – things work differently there, I think. What you have to see is that magic has its own logic."

Harry frowned.

"Which is?"

"Amorphous. Magic depends on intent, mood and confidence," Luna said. "You have to feel certain things in order to cast certain spells. You have to believe you can do it. You can't predict how thing will work, every time. Nobody knows the limits of magic."

“Okay, but what has it got to do with people believing me about Voldemort?”

Luna sighed.

“Wizards think differently from Muggles, Harry, because their lives revolve around magic. Their idea of what should possible and what should not is much more broad than that of Muggles.”

Harry chose not to point out that most people’s perspectives on magic weren’t as all-encompassing as Luna’s.

“People fought a long war against You-Know-Who and then, one day, he came across a baby and disappeared.” Luna hid her wreath behind her, demonstrating Voldemort’s disappearance. “Did people look for him for a long time? No. It might be silly to think that a baby can defeat an evil wizard, but everyone spent the very next day celebrating,” she threw petals into the air, “because they believed You-Know-Who to be gone.”

“So you are saying – ”

“I’m saying that belief is very important for wizards. And you, Harry, are a miracle. It’s easy to believe in you, if you allow it.”

Harry stared at Luna, but she just smiled at him somewhat vacantly, extracted the flowers from behind her back and started working on them again.

That night, all throughout dinner and Dumbledore’s announcement of Voldemort’s resurrection, Harry dwelled on Luna’s words. He wondered how many of those frightened, confused-looking students in the Great Hall believed Dumbledore now; how many could be swayed in the future. Rita Skeeter’s articles had probably shaken their faith in Harry; but then, Harry had quite a few friends, as well – friends who, in Padma’s words, were willing to bring him converts...

“There is a person I must acknowledge when I talk about Lord Voldemort’s return,” Dumbledore said. “I am speaking, of course, of Harry Potter.”

Excited murmurs swept the Great Hall. Snape was the only one at the high table not to look at least vaguely excited by that opening; instead, the man sent Harry another one of those speculative looks he'd taken to giving Harry as of late. Harry wondered how much he knew.

"Harry Potter managed to escape Lord Voldemort that night. He showed the kind of bravery few adult wizards have ever demonstrated when facing Lord Voldemort. For that, I honour him."

Dumbledore raised his goblet to Harry and Harry fought the urge to blush or protest loudly. First of all, he didn't remember showing any bravery, and secondly, he didn't want this attention on him. He'd done nothing heroic, and whatever Harry's position at the school, Dumbledore wasn't making it better by this display...

("Belief is very important for wizards. And you, Harry, are a miracle. It's easy to believe in you, if you allow it.")

Oh, damn it.

Uncomfortably aware of curious gazes from all sides, Harry made a conscious effort at relaxing, smiling confidently and projecting the image of a true hero unfazed by fame or attention. Facing all of Slytherin had been bad enough; this, bearing the scrutiny of the whole school at once, was positively hellish. Still, it had to be done. Harry would do well to get used to the spotlight.

He needed them to believe in him, after all.

-End of year four-

Disclaimer: I do not have the swine flu. (Well, I don't own Harry Potter, either, but I figured I'd tell you something you didn't already know.)

A/N: As usual, massive thanks to Gwendolyn for beta'ing this chapter, especially considering the circumstances. Also, I should say that spells in this chapter have not been checked by her because of those circumstances, so they might be revised later. Oh, and separate thanks to a number of people, including Bonehammer73, brick, SwissMiss, Lady Noir, and SophieBertrand, who helped me figure out an issue I'd been stuck on. And this is turning into an Oscar speech, but I really must briefly address this, since it's been brought to my attention by reviewers a few times: I'm aware of the thread at DLP, and am of course grateful for the feedback. And... well, I'll save the details and the other thanks I have to give for the grand Oscar speech at the end of this whole endeavour =)

V.

"The incantation for the Bone-Shattering Curse is *Fracta Ossem*; naturally, one has to concentrate on the target in order to determine which bone in particular is..."

Harry shook his head, suddenly disoriented, and went back to read the sentence again.

"The incantation for the Bone-Shattering Curse ..."

He blinked. Just a moment ago, the book had been fascinating, but now the spells seemed dull and impossible to master.

"The incantation..."

Harry felt a chill run down his spine. Thoughts crowded his head – heavy, unpleasant thoughts, ones that persistently manifested during his nightmares. What was he doing this for? He was at Privet Drive and couldn't practice magic anyway. Even if he could, what chance did he have against Voldemort, who –

Suddenly, the silence of his room was shattered by a blood-curdling scream.

It was coming from downstairs, and Harry heard noise – shuffling, and shouting, and something crashing, and he jumped up from his bed, book falling aside, and grabbed his wand.

He wished he had his Invisibility Cloak to keep him hidden from possible intruders, but he had the sinking feeling that he already knew who the intruders were, although he couldn't quite believe it.

He stepped out onto the landing outside his room, keeping to the shadows, and then, through the open front door, he saw Dementors, two Dementors right outside the Dursley home. A tall, dark Dementor glided after Dudley on the lawn, and Dudley collapsed mid-run, whimpering and clutching his head, and Aunt Petunia was running outside with a scream, Uncle Vernon hot on her heels –

And Harry hadn't noticed how he ended up on the bottom of the stairs, shouting:

“Expecto Patronum!”

Shapeless white mist emerged from Harry's wand as a Dementor glided towards him, completely incongruous with the neat lawn in front of the Dursleys' house. It was almost pitch black outside, too dark for ten o'clock at night, but Harry could dimly see Aunt Petunia tugging Dudley up, and Uncle Vernon trying to land wild blows –

“Excepto... Expecto Patronum!”

More of that wispy vapour. Harry could no longer discern what was happening outside; a Dementor was blocking the doorway. Harry heard screams, but he wasn't sure whether they were coming from the Dursleys or from inside his memories. Images swam before his eyes – Bertha Jorkins falling dead to the ground, Voldemort staring at him in triumphant malice, the Killing Curse speeding towards him...

Harry gripped his wand tightly enough to hurt and made himself think of what happened next: his mother's beautiful face, his father's smile, their loving words.

“EXPECTO PATRONUM!”

A bright white stag erupted from Harry’s wand.

It rammed straight into the Dementor at the threshold, colliding with it in a blur of luminescent greyish-white; with a screech so high-pitched Harry almost thought he’d imagined it, the Dementor floated onto the lawn, and the impenetrable haze of misery lifted from over Harry, and the distant screaming in his mind stopped entirely, and he found himself able to draw a deep breath again.

Harry sagged against the doorframe, clutching his wand in a sweaty fist, and he saw his Patronus dash after the Dementors, and lifted his eyes –

For all wrongs done, did the Dursleys really deserve saving?

Aunt Petunia was already falling away from a fleeing Dementor’s grasp. Dudley was wailing in fear, flesh trembling like a mound of melting jelly, and Uncle Vernon crawled on the ground and swung blindly with his fists as another Dementor glided past him in retreat. Looking at them from his spot by the door, Harry wondered if this was what he wanted.

How often had he dreamed of this, of seeing the Dursleys brought low and punished for their treatment of him? Here they were now, all three of them – broken, powerless. They’d been Harry’s tormentors for so long, but Harry held all the power, right now – if he’d wanted, he could leave the Dursleys to the Dementors’ mercy, and they wouldn’t be able to do anything. They had no power over themselves, let alone Harry. They were helpless, they were hysterical and pathetic, and –

Muggles. They were weak, pathetic Muggles. In a flash of bright revelation, Harry understood why his relatives had always been so scared of magic, and smiled despite the Dementors’ presence.

He told himself that he didn’t hate all Muggles, so it wasn’t wrong of him to revel in the inferiority of these particular ones.



His smile was fast replaced by a frown. The Patronus was chasing the Dementors further down the street now, and the Dementors' departure dispelled the veil of cold and darkness over Privet Drive. And it was great that the danger had passed, but there were at least two things glaringly wrong with this picture. First of all, the Dementors' presence at Privet Drive boggled the mind in and of itself. Secondly, now that the adrenalin rush had passed and he was able to think a little more clearly, it occurred to Harry that he was meant to have guards for this sort of situation, and that they didn't seem to be in sight.

It was all very hush-hush, and Harry only knew about the guards thanks to the twins; he'd been worried that it was Voldemort spying on him, before they let him know. His guards had resisted all attempts at communication when Harry had tried to initiate contact earlier in the summer. And he understood the need for secrecy, but this went above and beyond – what was the point of having a secret guard if it did not do anything?

Fucking went to show how much good it did to rely on Dumbledore.

The Patronus turned to look at Harry from where it stood on a street corner, gave a small deferential nod and then gradually dissipated in the night's air. Harry was left with twilight, tingling nerves and the Dursley family strewn across the lawn.

For a moment, he stood still by the front door, gathering his bearings. Then, with slow, measured steps, he approached his relatives.

Aunt Petunia's prone body was blocked to Harry's view by Uncle Vernon, who was kneeling in front of it. Uncle Vernon's fists were clenching and unclenching, and Harry could not see his face, but he assumed that the man was okay, since he seemed to be moving of his own volition. A bit to the side, Dudley stood on all fours, vomiting and coughing and sputtering, and Harry didn't spare him more than a fleeting glance.

He stepped forward.

Aunt Petunia lay sprawled, limbs at odd angles. She was pale as a wraith, and she didn't move and her eyes were wide and empty – and Harry felt cold wash over him as he gazed down at her.

She looked –

“Aunt Petunia?” he called, swallowing.

No response.

Harry threw a glance at Uncle Vernon, but the man seemed to be frozen in place. Harry lowered himself on the grass, his first – and irrational – instinct to check his aunt's pulse. It was clear that she was alive, she was blinking, but how did one probe for the presence of a soul inside the body?

“Aunt Petunia, if you hear me, please blink twice,” Harry said, feeling completely out of his depth.

No response, once again, just those steady, rhythmical blinks.

Harry clenched his jaw. He didn't have a fucking clue what to do, but it was clear that nobody else present did, either, and something would have to be done.

“Carry her into the house,” Harry said to Uncle Vernon, voice brooking no argument.

Through clearly not himself at the moment, Uncle Vernon remained capable of following simple orders: scooping up his wife, he wobbled towards the front door.

Harry turned to Dudley.

“Get inside,” he demanded.

Harry entered the house behind Dudley; Dudley staggered off to the living room after Uncle Vernon, but Harry took a few moments to do a final check outside and lock the door. Then, he walked into the living room after them both.

Aunt Petunia was on the sofa, face still deathly pale and eyes vacant. Dudley was kneeling on the floor next to her, rivulets of tears running down his fat cheeks, and pleaded with her to wake up. Uncle Vernon stood to the side; his eyes were glued to his wife, as if his entire existence hinged on watching her and waiting for her to rouse.

Aunt Petunia did not comfort her crying son and did not try to soothe her husband's fear. She just – lay there.

"She's not waking up," Dudley sobbed into the silence. "Why won't she wake up?"

Harry thought, dimly, that he was not reacting to this as he should. He'd spent some of the Dementor attack revelling in the feeling of power over his relatives; he probably ought to feel guilty about it now, but he didn't. He just felt – hollow. His aunt had lost her soul – and Harry knew, intellectually, that it was horrible, and nauseating, and even potentially traumatising, but he couldn't feel it. In fact, he couldn't feel anything.

As if a void had opened somewhere in his chest, and sucked all feeling away.

"She's awake, but she's not," Dudley was mumbling, rocking back and forth. "Not. Not..."

Just then, Harry saw a blur out of the corner of his eye. He whirled instinctively, wand brought up – but it was only an owl that swooped down towards him and dropped the letter it was carrying by his feet. Not waiting for a reply, the bird flew off again with a low hoot.

It was that sound that startled Uncle Vernon into awareness.

Just as Harry bent down to pick up the letter, noting the Ministry's seal on it, the man spun around.

"You!" he roared, face livid. "It's all your fault! What did you do?"

Uncle Vernon advanced at Harry, fists raised, and Harry fought to keep his face calm as he levelled his wand at him.

"Don't," he advised. "You know I can curse you."

"Going to kill me, boy, like you killed your aunt?" Uncle Vernon shouted, stepping closer still.

"She's not dead," Harry said quietly.

"THEN WHAT IS SHE?"

Another owl flew into the room, soaring over Uncle Vernon's head to drop its letter at Harry, who took it automatically.

"I WILL NOT STAND FOR THIS! I WON'T HAVE IT! I WILL KILL YOU WITH MY BARE HANDS!"

Vernon lunged at Harry, and Harry ducked from under his reach –

"Don't be stupid, this isn't the time!"

But Vernon caught him by his shirt, and swung with his fist –

Harry twisted in his uncle's grasp and kicked the man's knee as hard as he could, dodging the blow aimed at his head.

Vernon collapsed on the floor with a scream, and Harry leaned against the wall, letting out a breath. He raised his eyes to see whether Dudley would pose any danger to him now, but Dudley didn't seem to understand what was happening; he was still trying to wake his mother.

"How did the Dementors get here?" Harry asked.

He felt that, if he knew this part of the puzzle, he could move on to analysing the situation, but as it was he couldn't get past Dementors on the Dursleys' front lawn. It just shouldn't be possible.

"The – huh?" Dudley looked at Harry blearily.

"The creatures that were here," Harry clarified. "Couldn't you see them?"

"N-no." Dudley hiccuped. "I felt – something followed me. There was something horrible on the street, and I ran home, but it was there and then I was so weak and I saw – " He gulped. "And then mum was there, and then dad ran out, and then – "

"Followed you," Harry repeated.

Dementors just happened to turn up in Little Whinging and follow Dudley to Harry Potter's home? Weren't they meant to be guarding Azkaban somewhere in the North Sea –

"Don't you dare blame this on Dudley!" Vernon snarled, raising his head from the floor.

"I'm not blaming it on Dudley," Harry said curtly. "I'm just trying to think."

"What's there to think about, it's all your fault, if not for you – "

There was a knock on the front door.

"It's Remus Lupin and Alastor Moody," Lupin's voice said from the other side of the door when Harry went to check. "Please let us in."

Harry frowned.

"Prove it."

"I'm sorry?"

"Prove that it's you, or I'm not opening the door."

"Cheeky bugger," Moody grumbled. "Very well, Potter. I saw you after I was released from St. Mungo's and gave you back the Marauder's Map."

“And I told you that your father had been a stag Animagus at the end of your third year, after I helped you produce your stag Patronus.”

“Anyone could know both these things.”

“Harry.” Lupin sounded somewhat exasperated. “Don’t you have a letter from Dumbledore saying that we would be coming to check up on you?”

Harry looked down at the unopened letters in his hand and unfolded the one without the Ministry seal.

“Fine,” he said, after skimming it. “Come in.”

Lupin entered with a friendly smile on his face and Moody followed, his magical eye scanning the surroundings – it had evidently been replaced since Harry’d last seen him.

“What happened here?” Moody asked brusquely, walking right towards the living room. “Dumbledore says you’ve cast the Patronus Charm, but you’d better have a good reason, because the Ministry’s greedy for anything to charge you with – ”

“They can’t charge me after the first offence,” Harry said. “At least, they shouldn’t be able to, by their own laws – ”

Harry withdrew the Ministry letter and broke the seal.

“And is it your first?” Moody ascertained.

“Yes,” Harry said, not looking up from his letter. “Yes, first offence, paragraph C, magic in front of Muggles... My first warning,” he concluded, folding the letter again. “Besides which, there were two Dementors attacking me and my relatives.”

Moody harrumphed.

“Dementors, here?” Lupin wondered. “That’s – ”

He didn't have time to finish the sentence, because Harry's uncle caught sight of them as they stepped into the living room. Vernon had apparently managed to pick himself up from the floor, although he was heavily favouring his uninjured leg as he stood awkwardly by the sofa, glowering at the intruders. Dudley remained where he'd been, only throwing a fearful glance at the new arrivals.

"You!" Vernon snarled, pointing a fat finger at the wizards. "More of you invading my house!"

If Lupin and Moody were fazed by this greeting, they did not show it.

"I'm sorry, but – " Lupin began.

"You'd better be here to take the brat away, because I'm not having him in my house any longer!"

Moody glared at Vernon. Vernon was bigger, but Moody was a hell of a lot more intimidating – and Vernon paled as the ex-Auror barked, rolling his magical eye in its socket:

"Calm down and stop this racket! What seems to be the problem?"

"My aunt has been Kissed by a Dementor," Harry said quietly.

Lupin's face drained of colour. Moody's eyes, both normal and magical, focused on Aunt Petunia's body. The wizards walked over to check the veracity of Harry's claim, ignoring Vernon's protests.

"Our condolences," Lupin muttered in the end, stepping aside.

"Fucking hell," Moody said at the same time.

"We have to tell Dumbledore," Lupin added, looking like he agreed with Moody's sentiments. "The wards – "

"Are they still active?" Harry asked. "Were they even active, if the Dementors got here?"

"Could the Dementors enter the house itself?" Lupin inquired.

Harry thought back to the events earlier that evening.

“No,” he said after a moment. “That is, I’m not sure whether the Dementor didn’t enter because it didn’t have time, or because it couldn’t, but it came pretty close anyway...”

Over the summer, Harry had done some thinking about the blood wards he’d found out about last year, and he figured they were the answer to something that had him wondering for a while now. There had to be a reason why the Boy-Who-Lived had never had a worshipper come gawk at his house, or an assassin make way to his home, or a politician try to draw him into the wizarding world. He never even got fan mail, which one might have expected with him being so famous, nor any other tokens of his celebrity. Harry’s address was known and openly available to Hogwarts and to the Ministry, and yet he’d always been left alone, before and after he started at Hogwarts.

The wizarding world did not seem able to reach him at Privet Drive, as if the house was under a notice-me-not charm, unless they were expressly reminded to look for Harry there. That crazy house-elf a few years ago and the Dementors today were exceptions in this regard, but they were magical creatures rather than humans; perhaps the wards did not apply to them in the same manner. The Dementor attack also brought up the question of whether Voldemort having Harry’s blood in his veins had weakened the protection somehow, reducing the effectiveness of the wards. With Aunt Petunia having been Kissed, Harry couldn’t even begin to predict what would happen to the wards now.

“Your aunt is not dead,” Lupin said carefully. “So maybe the wards will keep. However, I am not sure of the details – I think it would be best not to risk it – I’ll go send Dumbledore a message.”

“That’s right, leave and take the brat with you!” Vernon shouted as Lupin exited the room. “He’s cursed us all! You and your magic – it didn’t do much for the brat’s parents, and now Petunia is – is – and I don’t care if all of you die, but I’M NOT LETTING YOU HARM DUDLEY!”



“CALM THE FUCK DOWN!” Moody growled, cutting Vernon off. “Potter won’t be able to stay here anyway, I reckon, and we’ll take him with us when we go, but if he has to come back, you’ll take him back. You’ll take him back and be helpful about it, get it, Dursley?”

Dudley quivered at Moody’s tone and hid himself behind an armchair. Vernon, for his part, flushed puce and looked about to say something unpleasant back, but then caught the expression on Moody’s face and paled again.

He gave a terse nod.

“Excellent,” Moody said. “Potter, go and collect your stuff.”

The really excellent part, in Harry’s opinion, was that he hadn’t even needed to argue in favour of leaving – Moody and Vernon had done all the work for him.

Harry’s packing was rushed; he threw things haphazardly into his suitcase, favouring speed over order. He had to leave several items of clothing behind to fit all his books in, but that was about the only trouble he’d had. He let Hedwig out, telling her to find him at his destination – and, thanks to the twins, he had a pretty good idea of what it would be.

Over the last month, the twins had sent him coded letters, disguising important information as nonsense. This way, Harry had learnt of Dumbledore’s secret organisation that was guarding him at Privet Drive this summer. Harry also knew the organisation was dedicated to fighting Voldemort; he knew the twins were living at the headquarters; he knew Sirius Black owned the house. It was difficult to glean anything more concrete from Fred and George’s letters, however, since they didn’t say anything outright.

(“Main question: the place for crocodiles, is it really in a restaurant? Capital punishment turns black their souls. Own up to house rivalry, infidel!”)

Perhaps, venturing into the lair of Dumbledore's cronies with Sirius Black in residence was not the greatest idea. However, Harry was curious to have a look at the inner workings of Dumbledore's organisation. Living at its headquarters could also provide Harry with an opportunity to learn more about what Voldemort was up to, because as of now, he knew next to nothing.

"All packed?" Moody said, once Harry returned to the living room to find Lupin there, too. "Fine then, let's go."

Harry nodded at his relatives.

"Bye," he said, for the benefit of the audience.

Dudley had still not emerged from behind the armchair; Vernon only muttered something under his breath. Whatever it was, Harry doubted it was complimentary.

Neither Lupin, nor Moody mistook the scene for a stoic goodbye, but Lupin did not remark on it even though he looked disturbed, and Moody chose to ignore the matter altogether.

xXxXx

Over the last month, Harry had corresponded with his friends, Hedwig making tireless rounds all over Britain, but only the twins proved truly informative. The others could do little but express their indignation (and, in Blaise's case, amusement) at the slander Harry was being subjected to by a large segment of the press. Harry was, supposedly, disturbed, dangerous and delusional; he'd dreamt up Voldemort's return in order to make himself appear more important. Moreover, he was in cahoots with Dumbledore as they tried to subvert the wizarding world with their outrageous lies. Such was the official Ministry line, and Harry thought they were laying it on thick, considering how public the debacle at the Third Task had been. According to Cedric, it was mostly Fudge and his stooges who were pushing this propaganda; many Ministry workers were quietly dubious.

("Some idiots are of course going to fall for the official word, but the scandal at the Third Task is too juicy to pass up. Have you read Skeeter's latest? Even she has trouble deciding whom to back...")

Indeed, Rita Skeeter's articles were an exercise in careful balancing. Instead of supporting or openly defying the Ministry line, she went with stirring up the masses by feeding them all kinds of conspiracy theories. Sometimes, she would offer speculation on how the Ministry was hushing up something in regards to the poor Harry Potter. At other times, she would suggest that Harry could not possibly have won the Triwizard Tournament through honest means. Overall, her body of work gave the impression that nobody was completely in the right here, and that she alone could uncover the shocking truth. Harry had even entertained the idea of contacting her, because he had the feeling that she might be interested in getting an inside scoop in exchange for casting him in a favourable light for once, but he wanted to assess the mood among the Hogwarts population before he took any drastic steps.

He couldn't act blindly without information. Information was a commodity that he was, hopefully, going to obtain at the Dumbledorians' headquarters.

The paper Moody thrust at Harry upon their arrival to a dark square somewhere in London told him that Dumbledore's secret group was called the Order of the Phoenix and that its headquarters were located at number 12, Grimmauld Place. The latter turned out to be a dingy old house with a hysterical portrait and a staircase decorated with severed house-elf heads; Harry had known the Blacks for Dark wizards, but the evident cheerfulness of their dwelling exceeded even his expectations.

A redheaded woman came out of a door further down the dim hallway to greet Harry, Moody and Lupin when they entered the house. She seemed somehow familiar, and, after a moment, Harry recognised her as the Weasley matriarch.

"Oh, good evening," she whispered, making an abortive movement towards Harry. "Harry Potter – well – it's good to see you again, of

course, dear – come through to the kitchen, we weren't expecting you, did anything happen, Remus?"

There were only three people in the kitchen: Mr. Weasley, a young man who looked like he was a Weasley too, and – of course – Sirius Black.

He looked much healthier than the last time Harry had seen him. Gone were the deranged expression, the dirty hair, the painful gauntness. Evidently, he'd at least somewhat recovered from his stay in prison.

Good for him.

Everyone stood up when they saw Harry enter, Mr. Weasley giving an exclamation of surprise.

"Harry Potter!" he said unnecessarily. "Well, good evening – what brings you here, is everything all right?"

"Not everything," Moody said, while Harry shook Mr. Weasley's hand. "There's been a bit of a clusterfuck with Potter's relatives."

"Alastor, really!" Mrs. Weasley exclaimed.

Moody scowled.

"Potter's aunt has been Kissed by a Dementor."

There were gasps all around.

"What was a Dementor doing there?"

"So the Patronus – "

"Has Dumbledore been notified?"

"What I want to know," Lupin said firmly, "is who was meant to be on guard duty tonight."

Harry very much wanted to know that too, as well as the reason why they had abandoned their post.

"It was Dung Fletcher, I think," the unknown Weasley said. "I remember him mentioning it."

"Dumbledore will rip him a new one," Moody said with relish.

"Er, it's a bit awkward, with us not being introduced," the young Weasley noted, turning to Harry. "I'm Bill. Nice to meet you and, blimey, I'm sorry about your aunt. I can't imagine how horrible it must be..."

"Oh." Harry said. "I'd rather not talk about it."

He was uncomfortable just having that unsettling absence of feeling, never mind airing it.

"Sorry," Bill said, looking sheepish. "I'm rubbish at this. So..."

"Are Fred and George around, then?" Harry asked, by way of changing the subject.

"Oh yes, they're just upstairs," Bill answered. "It was all boring talk down here, nothing was exploding or setting itself on fire, you know –"

"Yeah." Harry nodded.

"Ron's here too," Bill added. "And Ginny. It was nice of Sirius to let us stay while we're figuring out how to add security to the Burrow – our home," he clarified, seeing Harry's incomprehension.

There was still a month until Hogwarts. A whole month in close proximity to Ron Weasley; Harry thought his joy might just suffocate him.

And then, naturally, Lupin drew Harry aside from the group in order to formally introduce him to Sirius Black.

“Nice to meet you,” Harry said politely, wishing he could strangle Lupin.

Black gave him a winning grin, belied by the uncertainty in his grey eyes.

“Good to properly meet you too! Finally.”

Lupin looked between them, smiling.

“I’ll leave you to it, then.”

With that, the goddamn werewolf retreated, presumably giving Harry and Black space for a tearful reunion.

There was a moment’s silence. Then –

“Everything went wrong when I saw you last,” Black said, lips twisting into a shallow approximation of a smile. “I... well, I’d just spent twelve years in Azkaban. It wasn’t a good time for me to be meeting my godsons. So... can we try to start over, yeah?”

Black was giving Harry a look that was almost desperate in its intensity, and Harry held back the urge to snap at him to stop. What did the man want? Yeah, no worries, Harry would turn a new leaf just like that, because that’s how emotions worked with people. From here on out, they’d be a happy family and do whatever it was that happy families did.

“Sure,” Harry said. “We can start over.” He wasn’t certain how sincere that came out, so he went on: “Thank you for letting me stay at your house.”

Sirius Black winced.

“There’s no need to thank me. You’re my godson, Harry – of course you’re welcome to stay.”

Because family ties made everything okay, as the Dursleys had amply demonstrated.

“Right,” Harry said, forcing the memory of his aunt’s slackened face out of his mind.

“Actually... if it turns out that you can’t go back to your Muggle relatives, you’re welcome to stay with me,” Black offered. Harry must have been looking at him very strangely, because he gave an awkward shrug. “Well, if you wanted, of course. I mean, during the holidays and stuff. You’ll need a place to stay, right?”

“Why would you do that?” Harry asked, incredulous. “I mean, no offence, but you’ve just met me.”

Black shook his head.

“You’re – hell, Harry, I haven’t just met you! I mean, you don’t remember me, but...” Pain flashed over Black’s expression, but it was gone as fast as it came; the next moment, he was smiling crookedly. “You’ve grown up, of course, but you’re still my godson and my best friend’s son. That hasn’t changed.”

Just about everything else had, though.

And yet, if Black was half as emotionally invested as he pretended to be, perhaps he could be useful.

Despite the fact that he came here willingly, Harry did not feel confident on the Order’s home territory. He shouldn’t think of it that way, perhaps, as if they were his adversaries, but the Order were Dumbledore’s people. They might be dedicated to fighting Voldemort, but they were still taking their cues from the Headmaster, and that Headmaster’s track record at dealing with Harry was abysmally bad. Harry did not trust Dumbledore to do right by him; therefore, he did not expect the Order to do right by him, either.

That made it all the more important to have an ally here. The twins had served him well as spies, but it would be better still to have an Order member on his side, willing to tell him things that Dumbledore perhaps would not.

Harry swallowed his tiredness and tried to hide the wave of dislike he felt at the mere sight of Black's face.

"Yes," he said. "I'd forgotten that you must have known me when I was really small. You have to tell me about it sometime."

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Like Harry had expected, the Order was not eager to include him in their affairs, even despite Black's support. Matters came to a head the very second night Harry was at the headquarters; the Order was planning to have a meeting after dinner, and Harry lingered stubbornly behind.

"You're not yet of age, Harry," Mr. Weasley said. "Fred and George aren't allowed into the Order, either."

"I'm not asking to join the Order," Harry countered politely. "I just think that, considering past events, I should be given access to some information."

"I agree," Sirius Black said promptly. "Harry is just as involved in this war as we are."

Mrs. Weasley glared at him.

"It is the job of responsible adults to make sure he is not as involved," she said. "He is only fifteen!"

And yet he'd seen more of Voldemort than she ever had; funny how that worked.

"With all due respect, Mrs. Weasley, if my godfather believes I have a right to information, I do not see who else can have a say in the matter."

"Professor Dumbledore – "

" – is not my legal guardian, either."



"Very true, my boy," Dumbledore's jovial voice said from the kitchen's doorway. "However, I happen to lead this organisation, and as such I have authority over potential disclosure of information to outsiders."

Harry turned to face the Headmaster. Several people entered the room together with Dumbledore; among them were Lupin, a young woman with bubblegum-pink hair, a tall dark-skinned man and a man in a ridiculous top hat. All of them stared in interest between Harry and Dumbledore, as did the occupants of the kitchen.

Harry inclined his head.

"Of course, Headmaster. However, I recall you promising that you would not withhold information from me any longer," he said calmly. "Surely you don't mean to break your word now."

They both knew Dumbledore's word was bullshit, but the other people in the room didn't, and Harry would like to see the Headmaster weasel out of this one without losing face.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled merrily.

"Ah, the curiosity of youth!" Dumbledore said, evidently deciding to play the age card. "By all means, Harry. I do not mean to deprive you of information altogether, but I must ask you to be realistic in your desires. There are matters of security that cannot be overlooked."

"Just as long as I can trust your judgement, Headmaster." Harry smiled sweetly. "I presume that you stationing a guard around my house without letting me know was the result of some grave miscommunication?"

And so began the meeting that opened the Order's eyes to a few things about the Boy-Who-Lived. Harry quickly realised that, like everyone else, the Order had their ideas of what the Boy-Who-Lived should be like, and Harry was very blatantly not it. He contemplated trying to be it, once he saw how deeply the divide ran, but there were certain things that he could not conceal, and the dynamics of his relationship with Dumbledore was one of them. Harry wasn't going to let Dumbledore get away with anything just because they had an

audience, and it couldn't be helped that his and Dumbledore's interactions had shocked quite a few people, the elder Weasleys among them.

Snape's arrival caused yet another stir. The man stormed into the room, all billowing cloak and fearsome scowl, and his appearance took Harry by surprise, although he maintained an impassive face.

"Ah, Severus," Dumbledore said, beaming. "As you see, one of your students has joined us tonight." The slight non sequitur was obviously meant to warn Snape against saying too much in Harry's presence, but then Dumbledore continued, in the spirit of sharing: "You might be wondering, Harry – Professor Snape serves in the very important role of a spy for the Order."

Later, Harry realised that this was the point when he could have improved the Order's earlier impression of him. He should have bulged his eyes out in amazement, or let out a shriek, or – well, done something to reflect his feelings. However, he merely nodded, pretending not to be fazed by the news as he usually would, and was startled by Black's disbelieving –

"Is that all? That's all the reaction you're going to give?"

Harry looked at him blankly. The man's face reflected a mix between incredulity and indignation.

"Are you going to trust Snape – just like that?" Black continued, ignoring Dumbledore's frown and Snape's withering glare. "Are you – are you even – "

At loss for how to respond, Harry glanced at Professor Snape. The man was surveying Black with great derision.

"You'll do well to disregard Black's drivel, Potter. His stability was questionable before Azkaban, but after – "

"Shut up, you Death Eater, and don't you talk to Harry as if you have a right to tell him what to do – "

“You will find that I do have that right, Black. I’m Potter’s Head of House, Slytherin, in case it’s slipped your mind – ”

Harry took in Black’s slight wince, and Snape’s scowl, and he felt that there was a long story here that he didn’t want to know and certainly didn’t want to get dragged into the middle of.

“Gentlemen!” Dumbledore said sharply. “Do compose yourselves.”

And so they did, but the matter had certainly not been put to rest. In the following days, Black tried to reassure Harry that he didn’t really mind that Harry was a Slytherin, it was just that Harry shouldn’t listen to anything Snape had to say, ever, because Snape had hated Harry’s dad and would probably strangle Harry should they meet in a dark alley with no witnesses. Snape, for his part, informed Harry that Black had been capable of murder at sixteen, and, going by what happened to Pettigrew, was still capable of it, and Harry should be wary of the man for more reasons than the obvious Azkaban-induced madness.

All in all, both adults exhibited the maturity of house-elves on Firewhisky doping, and Harry didn’t even care to know what they were trying to prove.

The incident with Snape and Black had not gone unnoticed by the rest of the Order, either, and Harry caught wisps of conversations – how no fifteen year old should have a face that unreadable, how it was creepy, the way Harry controlled his emotions, and what had been done to this child, anyway, to make him this closed off? Harry resented being called a child, and the implication that something had been done to him, but of course he didn’t let his feelings show because – well, whatever they said, he’d learnt that showcasing his emotions would get him nowhere.

On the bright side, some people seemed to find him intriguing.

“You’re a lot more interesting than I thought you would be,” the pink-haired witch declared, eyes sparkling mischievously. “Name’s Tonks, if you didn’t catch it earlier. Pleased to meet you.”

Harry had been pleased to meet her, too, since she proved to be one of the more likeable people he'd encounter at the Order headquarters, and worth her weight in entertainment value besides.

More generally, that first Order meeting set the tone for all to come. The Order, whatever their feelings towards Harry, started taking him more seriously since he'd firmly set himself apart from the other kids and procured Dumbledore's blessing for attending some meetings. He wasn't allowed in on everything, but what the Order didn't tell him, he could wheedle out of Black – not that anything particularly exciting was happening. Both Dumbledore and Voldemort were busy trying to recruit allies, their interests clashing as far as humans, werewolves and giants were concerned. The Order was also worried that Voldemort would lure the Dementors onto his side, but that had not yet happened – which meant either that the attack on Harry this summer must have been authorised by someone at the Ministry, or that some rogue Dementors had deserted Azkaban after all.

Harry thought the latter option was actually preferable.

A lot of Voldemort's and Dumbledore's plans revolved around the prophecy. Apparently, after Harry had blithely survived his second Killing Curse, Voldemort got seriously worried about the prophecy, assuming that perhaps the second part, one he did not know, explained Harry's strange immunity. Therefore, along with covertly recruiting allies, Voldemort threw significant effort into infiltrating the Department of Mysteries, intending to steal the prophecy and hear it in full. Thanks to Snape, the Order knew of these plans and used them to further their own main goal: namely, getting the Ministry to accept Voldemort's return. The Order kept a guard around the Department of Mysteries, waiting for the Death Eaters or Voldemort to show up; then, they'd call for backup, stage a great ruckus and the ensuing fight would reveal to the Ministry with incontrovertible proof that Voldemort was indeed back.

"But what if Voldemort just Imperiuses someone to go there and steal it?" Harry inquired.

“He can’t,” Bill Weasley said brightly. “A prophecy can only be withdrawn by those it is made about, in this case you and You-Know-Who. Since you’re not going to get it, he’ll have to do it himself.”

That did make sense, Harry supposed, but the plan would unfold too slowly for his tastes. Besides which –

“If I were Voldemort, I would try to make me, that is, Harry Potter, get the prophecy for me. Then I wouldn’t have to go to the Ministry.”

Sirius Black nodded, grimacing.

“There is that danger, yes, but you should be safe at Hogwarts.”

To date, Harry had been attacked at Hogwarts three times... no, wait, four... or five? Either way, if that counted as safe, Harry wasn’t sure he wanted to know the Order’s take on high-risk locations.

“And you can resist the Imperius,” Tonks added, hair abruptly changing from pink to bright purple. “That’s the surest way You-Know-Who could have made you go after the prophecy, so...”

“You-Know-Who could still kidnap the lad in Hogsmeade, torture him into insanity and make him get the prophecy once his mind is broken,” Moody barked, startling everyone. “Constant vigilance!”

Tonks argued that Voldemort would hardly do something so rash if the whole point of the stealing the prophecy was to discover why he couldn’t curse Harry properly. Kingsley Shacklebolt countered that Voldemort could delegate torturing Harry to the Death Eaters and avoid coming into contact with him. Bill reasoned that chickening out of meeting Harry would lose Voldemort credibility with his own followers. Mrs. Weasley requested that could they please stop discussing something so morbid as torturing Harry into insanity and move on to more productive matters, like cleaning, perhaps?

Oddly, whenever cleaning was brought up, everyone tended to suddenly recall a thousand things they had to do just now, without delay, and thank you for the tea, but they will be going.

Harry had evaded his fair share of cleaning duty, mostly through sequestering himself in the library of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black. It had taken a while for people to figure out where he was disappearing to – and then he'd had a bit of a falling out with Sirius Black, who was rather vocal in his opinion that the House of Black was evil and whatever books they had collected over centuries of evilness were better off burnt. Harry agreed that the Blacks had been sick bastards, but he was actually quite intrigued by the way they had lived and thought. He'd visited a traditional wizard household before – the Longbottom Manor – but this was his first time in a Dark wizards' home and he was treating it as a fascinating museum trip.

The library, for one, was an absolute treasure trove of information.

It was like Hogwarts' Restricted Section wide open and free for perusal. A lot of the books were rather gruesome and temperamental – one of them had nearly bitten Harry's fingers off when he tried opening it without some arcane password – but Harry was learning loads of interesting spells. After all, hearing what the Order was up to in this war was very nice, but the best thing Harry could actually do with himself was getting stronger in preparation for the future. He'd tried to get people to help him train, but the Order had been firm: no magic during the holidays, and never mind that the Ministry could not detect it here. Or maybe it was Dumbledore who'd been firm – Harry wasn't sure, but, after a certain point, he'd stopped arguing. He smiled, nodded, promised to be a good boy, and then made sure not to practice where they could see. He was especially careful to keep Dark magic under wraps: it was the norm among the Slytherins to dabble in Dark magic, because it was foolish to ignore the weapons your enemies might use, but the Order didn't seem to uphold the same views.

They were all about keeping things clean and legal – except for the part where they were, y'know, illicit vigilantes opposing the Ministry.

Harry noticed the irony. They did not. That pretty much summed up the differences between them.

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Harry leaned back in his favourite library armchair and frowned, twirling his wand in his fingers. It was a pity that he could only try spells which caused external physical effects – he'd come across quite a few mind-altering curses he wouldn't mind learning. However, there was really very little point in casting, say, *Comprimo*, a curse that dampened your opponent's will to fight, on an inanimate object like a table. The table might become greatly depressed and give up all struggle, but Harry would never know.

"Kaio!"

A cushion folded in on itself, as if gradually divested of feathers, and the smell of burning down filled the air; then, the cushion's exterior went up in purple flames. Harry cast an air freshening charm and smiled. He was getting better at controlling the curse that burned objects from the inside. Cast on a human, this curse would be a lot more difficult to counter than a simple burning spell; pouring water on one's skin would do nothing without the proper counter-curse.

As had been said: the Blacks sure had interesting books.

"Macero!"

Harry was about to get up and test whether his spell had worked when Tonks came through the door and stepped right into the enchanted spot.

"Wotcher, Harry, Molly needs you in the drawing r – what the hell?"

Her right foot was sinking through the floor where Harry had made it turn soft and swampy. Restraining a snicker, Harry undid his work.

"Sorry." He tried to look contrite.

Tonks snorted.

"Don't try those puppy-dog eyes on me, it's not gonna work. You do know that you're not supposed to do magic, right?"

"I'm not?" Harry repeated, feigning shock. "Well, there's my quota of wisdom for the day."

Tonks rolled her eyes.

"I really ought to report you. Next time I will!" She wagged her finger threateningly. "No, really, you've got to – er – well, respect the law and all that rot, and I'm an Auror, so that's my duty..."

Harry arranged his face into an expression of utmost solemnity.

"Ah, screw it," Tonks said, waving a hand. "Now come, Molly wants to see you – and no, I won't pretend that I haven't found you. Honestly, some days I'm not sure who's a bad influence on whom – you on those Weasley twins or they on you..."

It was with great regret that Harry parted with Tonks on the landing and walked into the drawing room. Mrs. Weasley, the twins, Ron and Ginny were already there, busy disinfecting the curtains from Doxies hiding between the folds. Harry ignored Ron, gave a brief nod to Ginny and a fake smile to Mrs. Weasley, and then sided up to Fred and George.

After an hour, Mrs. Weasley announced a break for lunch and left the room to make food, taking Ginny with her. Glad for her absence, Harry and the twins approached a cabinet full of curious objects. Ron threw a disgruntled look at them and stomped over to the window; he seemed perpetually peeved that the twins included Harry in their company the way they never did him.

"What do you think it does?" George asked, peering at a silver snuffbox. "Ohshit!"

The snuffbox wriggled in his grasp and bit his hand, causing him to drop it onto the floor. Fred and Harry looked on in interest as George's hand developed a brown crust, glazing over.

"Most illuminating," Fred declared, carefully taking the snuffbox by his robe and putting it into his pocket. "I think we should see whether it can do anything for our you-know-what..."



He winked at Harry.

Just after he'd arrived at the headquarters, Harry had made a deal with Fred and George: he'd give them his Triwizard winnings as start-up capital for their joke shop in return for them giving priority status to his product orders and looking into developing a more serious line in addition to prank material. The twins had refused at first, saying that a thousand Galleons was too great a sum and that they'd do favours for Harry anyway – friends didn't have to pay friends. However, Harry pointed out that they couldn't be useful to him if they didn't have the starting capital for their venture. Since their business deal, Fred and George had acquired a spring in their step, obviously enthusiastic about all the ingredients and experiments they could now afford.

"Now, speaking of useful stuff, what do you think of Doxy poison, dear brother?" Fred said, nudging George and pointing to a bucket full of immobilised pests.

As the twins went to harvest some Doxies, Harry turned back to the cabinet. He ignored the vial of something that looked a lot like blood, and avoided a spindly-legged silver instrument of unknown function. His attention was drawn by a golden locket with an ornate letter S on it that seemed vaguely familiar. Harry frowned and took the locket, twirling it between his fingers. It was quite heavy, a solid weight on his palm, and he couldn't help thinking that he'd seen it somewhere before.

"Filthy boys touching family treasures!"

Harry started, looking down. Kreacher the annoying house-elf was glowering at him.

"Kreacher will not let nasty half-blood boy steal from the House of Black – "

"You're a really rude elf, you know that?"

"He does, and I'm sure he enjoys it," Sirius Black said, entering the drawing room. "What have you got there, Harry?"

“Nothing much.” Black was watching him expectantly, so Harry showed him the locket with an inward sigh. “Just this. Do you know anything about it?”

“Nope, first time I see it.” Black looked it over, then tried to open it to no avail. “Merlin knows what my charming relatives could be storing inside. I doubt it’s anything we’d want.”

With a careless move, Black threw the locket into the trash pile; the locket hadn’t even landed when the house-elf gave a crazed screech and leaped after it.

Everyone turned around to watch, stunned, as Kreacher sailed through the air and caught the golden locket. The elf then dashed to the door, clutching the locket to his chest – and, in the doorway, collided right with Severus Snape’s legs.

Snape raised an eyebrow as the house-elf wriggled by him, and then turned to glare at everyone gathered in the drawing room. Despite the warm summer, he was as pale and disagreeable looking as ever.

“Potter, a word,” he demanded, not bothering with greetings.

“What about?” Black butted in immediately.

Snape was clearly going to say something that would only worsen the situation, so Harry rushed to talk before the man had a chance to respond:

“It’s all right, Sirius,” he said, plastering on a smile. “I don’t mind.”

Black and Snape had still managed to exchange a couple of insults before Snape and Harry left the room, but at least they hadn’t managed to drag Harry into that spat. Harry Potter: 1. Immature adults: 0.

Once in the library, Snape whirled around.

“The Headmaster has asked me to inform you of the situation with your relatives,” he said without preamble.

Harry nodded, attentive. He’d been wondering about this for a while, but Dumbledore had put off giving him the answer – Harry was sure that the old man was doing all he could to somehow keep the wards over the Dursleys’ house intact.

“The wards required your aunt’s consent to remain charged,” Snape continued. “They relied upon her goodwill to let you stay. Since she is, as of recently, quite stripped of reason – ” Snape’s lip curled unpleasantly. “ – she cannot give her approval. Theoretically, the wards could also rely on the consent of your cousin, since he is a blood relation, but he remains quite unconvinced. I am given to understand that your uncle is the one who negatively affects his decision.”

Harry snorted. Yeah, he could imagine.

“So the wards broke, then.”

“This is not a laughing matter, Potter!” Snape hissed. “It should also be clear to you that we cannot let the Ministry discover this, for, with your Muggle relatives refusing to take you in and your magical guardian a convicted criminal on the run, you could become a ward of the Ministry. In the present situation, there are few scenarios less desirable.”

“The Dursleys wouldn’t stop being my official guardians just because the wards fell,” Harry countered, refusing to balk before Snape’s glare. “I don’t think the Ministry even knew about the wards, sir.”

Harry would rather eat his own dress robes than expect Dumbledore to spill such information.

Snape sneered at him.

“Naturally, the Ministry knew nothing. However, now that the wards have fallen, the house is no longer protected from wizards, and the home of the Boy-Who-Lived is an obvious target – ”

“So did the wards contain a notice-me-not element? Sir?” Harry asked, curious.

“A wizard-repellent one, as far as I am aware,” Snape corrected. “They contained a unique wizard-repellent element, perhaps because your mother was a Muggleborn, which is why the wards could be maintained by your Muggle aunt.”

“Sir, but how much of it was my mother’s doing and how much did Dumbledore – ”

“I’m not here to answer your idiotic questions until the end of time, Potter,” Snape interrupted, scowling at Harry through a curtain of greasy hair. “What you need to know is that the Headmaster has managed to convince your uncle to remain your legal guardian in name only, with the provision that he does not have to see you again.”

“Does this mean – ”

“Officially, nothing has changed. Your Muggle uncle has custody of you and his home address is listed as yours on Ministry records. Unofficially, you will spend your holidays elsewhere.”

Harry nodded.

“The Headmaster has layered new wards onto your relatives’ house, to protect them from wizards that can now find them. He has also asked me to inform you that your aunt has been transferred into a Muggle hospital, where she will be taken care of. Now, if you don’t have any more questions – ” Snape’s look communicated that Harry had better have no questions. “ – I shall take my leave.”

“Why didn’t the Headmaster just Oblivate them?” Harry bit on his lip as soon as the words burst out of him. Suggestions like this were blasphemous at the Order headquarters...

Snape gave Harry a long inscrutable look.

“Obliviating your relatives would have been futile, as the wards rely upon sincere emotion. The Headmaster could remove the memory of the Dementor attack, but he would not be able to generate enough goodwill in your relatives for the long-term maintenance of the wards.”

“I see.” It did not escape Harry that Snape had not claimed the Headmaster to be above Obliviating his relatives.

Already by the door, Snape turned around.

“Oh, and Potter? If you have been entertaining dreams of becoming the Slytherin prefect this year, give them up – Mr. Malfoy got the position.”

When Snape departed with a final sneer, Harry did not return to the drawing room to clean. Instead, he lowered himself back into his favourite armchair and took out his wand.

He wasn’t taking his irritation out on innocent cushions. It was called spell practice, damn it.

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The sidelong glances and excited whispers started already at Platform 9¾. Harry had been prepared, of course – it was inevitable with the way the previous school year had ended and with all the slander in the Daily Prophet. The student population had to be curious, and curious was better than adamantly antagonistic, so Harry didn’t let on that the scrutiny bothered him. He joked with the twins, who then went off to greet Lee Jordan; he withstood a very demonstrably flaunting hug from Padma; he shook hands with Cedric.

“Stop glaring at everyone,” he muttered to Neville, as they boarded the train. “Not all these people are against me.”

He hoped.

“Hey, Harry!” Lavender Brown and Parvati chorused when he walked past their compartment.

He smiled at them and ignored Seamus Finnigan's glower. In the compartment a little way ahead, Ernie Macmillan was arguing with Zacharias Smith about whether or not Harry could be trusted. Ernie was saying that, if Cedric confirmed that Harry had been Portkeyed away from the Third Task, it was probably true, and that they couldn't discount what happened after the task. Smith insisted that Harry was definitely barmy, and had Ernie forgotten the way Harry the gloryhound stole the spotlight from Hufflepuff last year?

Terry and Anthony waved at Harry cheerily when he passed them by, and their friend Michael Corner nodded at him in greeting. A bunch of second year Ravenclaws paled when they saw Harry and shut the compartment door in fright.

"Sorry, Harry," Hermione said, squeezing past him in a rush. "Oh, hi, Neville, I didn't see you on the platform! I'm meant to ride in the prefect carriage, it's somewhere up ahead –"

"I know, Cedric is already there, I think," Harry said, as Neville stood aside to let Hermione pass. "You might want to wait up for Tony, he's the Ravenclaw fifth year prefect this year –"

"Really?" Hermione beamed. "It's nice to have a familiar face there, I don't know who the other fifth year Gryffindor prefect is yet."

"It's Dean Thomas," Harry said. "Cedric's Head Boy, he's got the list... You should see Padma there, too."

Hermione didn't seem delighted at that last titbit of information, but instead chose to vent her frustration at the fact that Malfoy and not Harry became the Slytherin prefect this year.

"She's right," Neville said, as they sat down in an empty compartment. "You would have been a lot better than Malfoy. I wonder who decides these things."

"Head of House?" Harry suggested. "Headmaster? I've no idea. I'm sure it's a political decision, either way."

“And a sad state of affairs it is, when supporting Malfoy is a more politically sound decision than supporting you, Harry,” Blaise said, entering together with Millie. “Hello, Longbottom. Can’t say I’ve missed seeing you.”

“Likewise, I’m sure,” Neville muttered.

Millie frowned at Harry.

“So, Potter. Want to tell us what you’ve been so secretive about all summer?”

“Yeah, just a moment – Luna! In here,” Harry said, getting up and opening the door.

“Hello, Harry,” Luna said. Harry had forgotten quite how dreamy Luna’s voice was. “I had wondered when I’d be seeing you. People are talking about you, you know.”

“They’re even writing about him in the newspapers,” Blaise said seriously. “Quite famous, our Harry is.”

Neville moved over to let Luna sit next to him.

“So?” Millicent prodded, undeterred. “What did you do in the summer?”

“Stayed at the headquarters of Dumbledore’s underground club,” Harry said. “And it wasn’t half as grand as it sounds like, so there’s no need to make that face.”

“What was it like, then?” Neville asked.

“And did you learn anything interesting?” Blaise added.

Harry grimaced.

“Not really. Dumbledore is mainly concerned with bringing Voldemort out in the open and recruiting allies, which is, well, pretty common sense.”

“Has he got a plan?” Neville inquired.

Harry thought about the prophecy, the guards around the Department of Mysteries, the endless meetings and Snape’s spying.

“Nothing to write home about,” he said.

Blaise snorted.

“Figures. My mother has always believed that Dumbledore is not half as competent as he pretends to be.”

Neville glared at him.

“Dumbledore is the most powerful wizard alive!”

“So what? He’s still incompetent,” Millie snapped. “Just look at who he’s been hiring for Defence teachers. The school’s standards are declining every year.”

“Not to mention Binns,” Blaise said. “It’s criminal, how little history we’re actually learning. Criminal.”

“Well, I think his worst decision was hiring Snape to teach Potions,” Neville declared.

“You’re just saying it because you’re a Gryffindor – ”

“And you only like him because he favours Slytherins – ”

“Dumbledore’s beard is pretty,” Luna said, interrupting the budding quarrel. When everyone quieted down to stare at her, she added: “Some things he does are very strange, though. I think he might be infected with Wrackspurts.”

“Exactly,” Blaise agreed. “Wait, what?”

Dumbledore’s staff-hiring choices became a subject of discussion once again at dinner, after Dolores Umbridge – a pink toad thinly



disguised as a human – stood up and randomly gave a supremely convoluted, and deeply worrying, introductory speech.

“Dolores Umbridge,” Nott said with a pensive air. “Formerly, the Senior Undersecretary to the Minister. Should be interesting.”

“A bold career move,” Harry noted lightly.

Inside, he was far from cheerful. From her speech, it could be deduced that Umbridge had very strong support of the Ministry behind her, and Nott’s oddly forthcoming comment shed light on just how powerful the woman was. In the current political climate, with Dumbledore barely hanging on to bargaining power in the Ministry, her appearance at Hogwarts was more than a little sinister.

“Umbridge is a friend of your father’s, isn’t she?” Nott continued, turning to Malfoy.

Harry’s eyebrows rose; it was uncharacteristic for Nott to part with valuable information so easily. Perhaps he and Malfoy had had a falling out.

Malfoy threw Nott a derisive look.

“Of course, my father has friends in the higher echelons of the Ministry.”

Yep, they’d definitely had a fight.

“And I’m going to enjoy watching you squirm, Potter,” Malfoy said, turning to Harry. “You see, Madam Umbridge absolutely abhors attention-seeking liars.”

“I wonder how she’s going to deal with you, then,” Harry said.

Malfoy’s eyes narrowed.

“Think you’re funny, do you? Well, we’ll see who has the last laugh.”

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In retrospect, it was ironic that Harry had learnt more while locked up in a creepy old house than he did in his actual Defence lesson at Hogwarts. Under Umbridge's vigilant eye, the fifth year Slytherins read a mind-numbingly boring book and took notes – with Umbridge promising sweetly that they had nothing to fear in her class, since they would be practising no actual magic. She stalked between student desks, eyes alert for possible miscreants, and exuded an aura of such self-satisfaction that Harry felt the surging desire to strangle her. She took special notice of Harry, too; apart from insinuating, not very subtly, that there was a misguided person in the class who'd been telling them awful lies, she gazed at Harry in a way that suggested that she was waiting for him to slip up and give her an excuse to do something horrible. Harry resolved not to give her the chance and refrained from making disrespectful comments.

Harry had expected that Umbridge would try to discredit him before the school population. Umbridge's refusal to teach them any spells came as an unanticipated blow.

The Slytherin class had been quiet and watchful; they'd gone along with Umbridge's lesson plan without a protest. Harry resolved to ask his friends from other Houses how their Defence lessons had gone – maybe someone else, the brave Gryffindors for example, had actually asked the professor about using magic.

Turned out, Hermione had.

"There won't be a need to practice these spells," she said, mocking Umbridge's condescending tone. "Theoretical understanding will adequately prepare you for your OWL exam. There is nothing dangerous waiting for you in the outside world."

"Yes, and You-Know-Who doesn't count," Neville agreed. "Ron Weasley asked."

Umbridge had fuck awful timing: Harry couldn't afford to waste a whole year of Defence! Voldemort was out there, even if he wasn't yet moving openly, and Harry knew that they would meet again – it wasn't a question of if, but of when. And Harry needed to be better

prepared than he'd been the last time, and preparing was the only thing he could do in this war at this point, and he couldn't do even that if he didn't get to learn.

"Yes, but Harry, didn't you train last year anyway?" Padma said, when they went to the Library after their Arithmancy class to work on homework. "You were always busy, studying for the Tournament." Padma pursed her lips, perhaps remembering their failed romance that took place during that time. "Surely, you could organise something like this again."

Harry snorted.

"A lot of things changed since last year. The guys who trained me then are more likely to ambush me now."

That was a slight exaggeration – there were indeed numerous Slytherins who would probably try to throttle Harry in his sleep if Voldemort told them to, but so far, Harry had been met with no violence. Or, well, no more violence than was normal for Slytherin – and, Ministry propaganda or no, not many people dared to really push a Triwizard winner who'd defeated Voldemort as a baby and was immune to the Killing Curse, if rumours were to be believed.

The idea of getting extracurricular training stayed with Harry, though – perhaps because he'd been so used to it from last year, it almost felt that something was missing from his life without those training hours, despite how busy he already was with the OWL coursework and Quidditch practices. A couple of weeks into the school year, he brought it up with Cedric, to see how it would fly.

"You want me to train you," Cedric said dubiously. "I – don't think that I'm against it, or anything, but I think it's a little silly, considering that it was you, not me, who won the Triwizard Tournament in the end."

Harry rolled his eyes.

"You know how I've won – I've told you about Barty Crouch, Jr. paving the way for me –"

“That’s bullshit, Harry,” Cedric said, frowning. “That is – it’s true that I probably know more magic than you, considering that I’m two school years ahead, but it would be a lie to say that you weren’t at all responsible for your win. Barty Crouch didn’t do the first task for you, nor the third, and we’ve had our disagreements, but you did win in an even duel between us. Uneven, actually, since you were injured.”

“Ced – ”

“I could agree to us training together, though. Perhaps with a few other people – it’s not just you who’s falling behind this year, we’re all upset about Umbridge.”

“You’re suggesting – ”

“A duelling club of sorts, yes.” Cedric nodded. “Would it be such a bad idea?”

Harry had taken a few days to think about it, but the more he thought, the more he liked it. It wasn’t only the opportunity to practice defence that appealed to him, but also the chance to reach out to a wider school population. He couldn’t climb onto the table during dinner and declare himself innocent against all of Umbridge’s accusations; he did not dare speak against her publicly at all, for fear of retaliation; once she became the High Inquisitor, he also gave up on the idea of contacting Rita Skeeter – while he might sway a part of the public that way, he would also have to suffer severe consequences. His support base was just not wide enough for risky moves such as those. However, an underground effort –

That could work.

That was worth trying.

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Two weeks after his conversation with Cedric, Harry stood in front of a crowd of twenty-odd people in the Hidden Room, preparing to give his first ever speech. A lot of the people here he knew; some he didn’t. Quite a few were older – Cedric’s Hufflepuff friends and the twins’

Gryffindor buddies. Ginny Weasley and Colin Creevey were the youngest, though they might be beaten soon by Astoria Greengrass, if she'd follow Daphne in. Harry had a feeling that people would continue trickling in: the idea of Defence practice seemed to be a popular one – or, maybe, it was the allure of defying Umbridge.

Harry had done his best to observe the woman since his dispiriting first lesson with her, and quickly found that her weakest point was her absolute belief that Ministry power could accomplish everything. Umbridge envisaged herself to be the most influential being on the planet bar the Minister himself, simply because she enjoyed strong Ministry endorsement. While it was true that Ministry backing made her a very dangerous adversary, Umbridge tended to rely on that power too much and disregard people's feelings.

She alienated teachers without a second thought; she was condescending to students; Filch was the only being in Hogwarts, of those alive or dead, who wholeheartedly approved of her. Even people who openly supported Umbridge's policies could not justify her refusal to teach them Defence; Harry had particularly enjoyed putting Malfoy on the spot for that one. Nobody rebelled openly, of course, but it was early days yet. The school's silence was borne out of caution, not genuine support for Umbridge.

Harry was doing his best to capitalise on that.

"Good evening to you all," he said, projecting aplomb he did not feel. "Introductions aren't necessary, seeing as we all know why we're here, but I suppose a few inspirational statements won't hurt, so do me a favour and listen up."

Blaise shook his head; Cedric smiled encouragingly from where he stood amid other Hufflepuffs; Hermione looked ready to take notes.

"So – we're all here because we believe that Umbridge is doing a stellar job at bollixing up our Defence classes. Sitting on our arses and reading useless books does not sound like a productive way to go about learning spells to me, and, clearly, to you neither."

"Hear, hear," the Weasley twins chorused.

“Therefore, it’s high time we took matters into our own hands and taught ourselves what we are being denied in class,” Harry continued. “This is why we are holding the first meeting of the duelling club – ”

“Which will hopefully sail better than Lockhart’s duelling club did,” Fred added.

People around the room snickered. Harry smiled.

“One would hope so, yes,” he agreed. “Now, more importantly... I believe we’ve come here not only because Umbridge is teaching us absolutely nothing and can potentially jeopardise our exam results. We are also angry at the way Umbridge has taken over the school. Umbridge is not here to teach us: she is here to spy on us and sabotage Hogwarts. She will only get as far as we let her. I say, let’s amass strength and drive the bitch out.”

People were watching him, as though spellbound. Even Padma and Parvati had stopped gossiping and were looking at him with wide eyes. Hell, Blaise was listening. When Harry made a pause, the crowd suddenly burst into applause, complete with whistles and appreciative comments.

“Thank you,” Harry went on, once it died down. “Now, let’s just run through a few technical details before we start practicing. The duelling club is not illegal according to Umbridge – yet,” he said, looking over the congregated students and willing the next message to sink in. “She’s just become the High Inquisitor, so she might very well outlaw practising defence out of class; I don’t know, but I don’t want to find out. The bottom line is – don’t get caught,” Harry said emphatically. “Don’t mention this club to people you don’t trust, don’t talk about it where you might be overheard, and try not to be overt when you’re going for a meeting.”

Harry seriously hoped that people understood the need for secrecy, because so far, they did not have any security arrangements. Hermione had suggested cursed parchment, but that would only be effective after they’d been betrayed and would do nothing to prevent

a leak. Blaise had mentioned that his mother used some sort of a parchment that bound people to silence; he promised to look into that.

“You’ll be informed of the dates for future meetings through the club grapevine – all of us here have friends in common. It would, of course, be easier to set aside a certain night every week, but we have to allow for the Quidditch practices of all House teams and prefect meetings for those who have them.”

Harry was proud to say that they had collected a decent number of prefects here, actually. Ernie Macmillan and Hannah Abbott from Hufflepuff; Padma and Anthony from Ravenclaw; Dean Thomas and Hermione from Gryffindor. A few sixth years, too. Not to mention the fact that the Head Boy was in attendance.

It paid to be well connected.

“If you have any additional questions, don’t hesitate to ask – and let’s finally start on some spells! Can everyone here do a Stunner?”

Harry had discussed the lesson plans with Cedric prior to this meeting. They figured they’d better start from simple, but necessary spells, and those who knew how to do them could help those who didn’t. Harry expected that he would be quite ahead of his classmates due to having learnt a lot of spells last year and even more in the Black library this summer. Besides, Defence, in addition to Potions, was a subject he’d consistently studied ahead for by virtue of necessity – he’d had to defend himself ever since first year.

Following Harry’s orders, people dispersed through the room to practise in pairs, and instructors started walking among them, helping out.

“Wow, Harry,” Padma said, coming up to him. “You look quite dashing when you go all authoritative, did you know? Now, will anyone tell me how this Stunning Spell actually works? Of course, I know the incantation, but that doesn’t mean I can cast it right – ”

“I’ll show you,” Cedric offered.

Cho materialised by Cedric's side and requested to be shown the spell, too. Harry smiled at them and walked over to correct Susan Bones's pronunciation.

"Thanks, Harry," she said, smiling. "I think I'll get it now – Stupefy!"

Harry blocked automatically as a red beam of light flew at him. Susan laughed in glee; when she did, cute dimples formed on her cheeks.

"You're quite welcome," Harry said, blinking.

Maybe it was just him, or the lighting, but suddenly a girl he used to pass by in the corridors without a second glance looked really pretty. Not breathtakingly beautiful like Fleur, or quite as obviously attractive as Padma and Parvati, but there was just something appealing about her. The classical features of her face, combined with the braid she always wore and the pearl earrings, made Harry think of girls on old oil paintings he'd seen around Hogwarts.

How very bizarre.

With a mumbled goodbye, Harry went over to help Terry, Anthony and their friend Michael Corner, and then Neville and Hermione waved him over. He was glad he wasn't the only one who knew how to do the spell, because he couldn't imagine trying to instruct everyone at once.

And it was sort of creepy, the way these kids kept turning to him for advice – as if he wasn't a student, just like them.

"Thanks for giving me a chance to be here," Dean Thomas said awkwardly, when Harry stopped by to correct his wand movements.

Harry glanced at him.

"Neville recommended you." He shrugged. "Besides, you seem like a decent bloke, from what I've seen at Quidditch."

And a prefect besides.



Dean nodded. Luna, who was his partner, seemed to lose interest in their conversation and instead turned to watch as Mandy Brocklehurst accused Terry of being a chauvinistic male pig.

“Neville also said that you wouldn’t spill things to Weasley and Finnigan at the first opportunity,” Harry continued, cocking his head to the side, and he knew that Dean had not missed the warning in his voice.

“Do you think – eventually – ”

“I’m not rejecting anyone,” Harry said pleasantly. “Weasley just needs to acknowledge that he’s been a dick to me for no good reason ever since first year. He should also apologize to me for it. And he needs to get over the Gryffindor jingoism, though that might be asking too much.” Harry smiled wryly. “You see, I find it pretty pointless if I teach someone to fight and then they turn against me.”

“Yeah... I get it. You’re right. He’s just...” Dean floundered for an explanation. “Never mind. I’ll work on him.”

“All right,” Harry said. “Just don’t be too obvious about the club – and good job on that Stunner, I think you’re getting it soon.”

Soon as in, like, after a lot of practice. Harry frowned as he approached Tracey and Daphne, who were finding new and exciting ways to butcher the incantation. It was ridiculous that so many fifth years, and even some of the older kids, were unable to do an elementary Stunning Spell. Maybe starting up the duelling club was an even better idea than Harry had initially thought – such a level of incompetence was untenable with the threat of Voldemort looming above them all.

Disclaimer: I am not the person who owns Harry Potter.

A/N: My beta Gwendolyn has been so wonderful that I'm sure she's moved up several karmic levels just while helping me with this chapter. Any remaining typos or syntactic silliness are my fault entirely. I'd also like to thank JustWriter2 for bringing up a point that I might have otherwise overlooked.

"What time are we supposed to be meeting Hermione at Three Broomsticks, again?" Neville asked, searching distractedly through his pockets.

Harry glanced at his watch.

"In about five minutes, so we should get going," he said. "What are you looking for, anyway?"

"I think I might have forgotten it inside," Neville mumbled. "The tweezers for my Mimulus Mimbletonia – you know how touchy it's been since the Weasley twins borrowed it for Stinksap. I should never have let them near it."

"Just go check in the shop," Harry recommended, waving at the door of Dervish & Banges. "I'll wait for you here, all right?"

Neville disappeared inside with a promise to be quick, and Harry leaned against the wall by the door. The first Hogsmeade Saturday happened to fall on a crisp and mercifully dry October day, and it was positively liberating to escape outside the school bounds for a while.

Hogwarts was currently an arena for a high-stake game of hide-and-seek, and everyone was a player. So far, the duelling club had managed to stay off of Umbridge's radar, but the club kept growing, and Harry worried that, sooner or later, there would be a leak. Umbridge had also taken to inspecting Hogwarts teachers' classes, which rattled everyone's nerves. McGonagall walked around with the expression of a cat whose tail had been stepped on, and Harry had heard awful stories about Trelawney's assessment. He could only be happy that Hagrid wasn't around, or else he'd be fired on sight for being a half-giant.

Harry's eyes followed a blonde girl with braided hair. He couldn't quite see from here, but she looked kind of like Susan Bones, and wouldn't it be fortunate if they just happened to bump into each other?

And then, Harry felt a prickling at the back of his neck.

He looked around, alert at once. Everywhere around him, students milled about, chattering between themselves, and Harry couldn't figure out the source of his unease. Everything seemed to be fine, but

—

Then he saw it: just a few feet away, a very large blond man in dark robes was heading in Harry's direction. He wore a pleasant expression on his face and looked for all the world as if he was just taking a walk, but something about him gave Harry pause. Something — the way he glanced around surreptitiously, and held his wand close

—

Harry felt his heart start beating faster.

I should get inside, he thought, and already moved to the door to Dervish & Banges when he realised that inside a small space with one exit was not where he wanted to be if he was being followed.

He slunk away from the wall and headed off nonchalantly, hoping that his pursuer would not realise he'd noticed him. Just a bored student deciding to walk somewhere else.

To Honeydukes, for example. They had a great cellar. With an excellent passage to Hogwarts.

In the reflection of a shop window, Harry saw the man crane his neck to find him in the crowd and then speed up his steps.

Harry ducked behind a heavyset woman and increased his pace, too.

He wondered whether he was being paranoid — what if this was just the Order following him again? What if it was a well-meaning tail, not a malicious one?

Just then, he saw another man heading towards him from the opposite direction. He was walking straight towards Harry, and the massive blond Harry had already noticed was behind, and their positioning assured Harry that his instincts weren't failing him – the Order wouldn't be herding him like this.

"Contego," Harry muttered, hoping that the Disillusionment Charm would make him more difficult to find.

Harry's mind was awl, trying to work through the possibilities. He couldn't see any Order members around, so no help would be coming from those quarters. Would it be better to stay in a crowded area or isolate himself from others? If these were ordinary burglars, Harry would have definitely stayed among other people, but –

("You-Know-Who could kidnap the lad in Hogsmeade, torture him into insanity and make him get the prophecy once his mind is broken!")

- these could very well be Voldemort's people, and they were unlikely to regret catching innocents in spellfire. At the same time, Voldemort was lying low, and he wouldn't want to attract attention to himself by staging an all-out attack in Hogsmeade.

Ministry would hush it up, though, and if Harry knew it, then Voldemort knew it too –

Harry felt a spell whizz past him, and his mind was rapidly made up.

He entered Gladrags Wizardwear, then swerved between lines of clothing towards the back door, muttering apologies to customers he narrowly avoided collision with. He exited onto the smaller path that went parallel to the main street behind the buildings and then ran towards Honeydukes.

He was already past the back of Zonko's when the sound of running feet echoed behind him.

"Potter! Stop!"

Harry glanced behind to see the blond from before chasing after him; Harry sent a Stunner flying at his bulky form, followed quickly by a Chocking Curse.

"Stop, we only want to talk to you! Stupefy! Impedimenta!"

Harry briefly wondered at the way the Death Eater made the easy curses verbal – almost as if he wanted Harry to know what he was casting.

"Fracta Ossem!" Harry fired in response.

Judging by the wail that sounded from behind, Harry's Bone-Shattering Curse was a success. He sprinted forward – almost there, he could already see the sign for Honeydukes – when he felt a whole barrage of nonverbal spells hit his shield, and staggered.

He poured all his might into holding his shield up – they were mostly Stunners, from what he saw, and Body-Binds, and other non-lethal curses, but they were all powerful, and precise, and vicious, and he had no time to fire spells of his own. He felt his Disillusionment Charm slip.

Harry turned around fully and saw that there were two Death Eaters behind him, now – and, while Harry had managed to injure one of them, the other was in top form and firing an unrelenting volley of spells at Harry's shield, and Harry felt that he would not be able to hold it up much longer.

"Potter," the second Death Eater said. "There is no need for anyone to get hurt if you'd only listen to us."

Harry dove from the next incoming curse.

"Kaio," he whispered, and rolled out of the way of the next spell. He dodged again, quickly shielded and fired: "Segrego –"

"We are not here to harm you," the blond man said, batting Harry's curses away. "We are here merely to talk to you, and we have no desire to harm you at all."

A stray thought about trying to use Unforgivables – a sure way to disable his attackers – flitted through Harry's mind, but he didn't dare. Not in the middle of Hogsmeade, not when they were punishable by a stay in Azkaban, not with the Ministry's current feelings about Harry.

"Vexo," he muttered. "Mulco – "

"Stop it," the brunet Death Eater commanded, barely sidestepping Harry's last curse. "We swear not to harm you if you cease to attack us – "

Harry dodged the next curse – a Stunner, a nonverbal one this time – and said:

"If you don't want to harm me, you've got a strange way of showing it. Macero!"

"If you would only stop and listen, we would try to subdue you no further," the man said, almost chidingly. "The Dark Lord has decided that he's been too hasty in his initial assessment of you – "

Harry reinforced the shield around himself just in time for it to repel a non-verbal Expelliarmus.

"And therefore he has sent us here with the mission to offer you to disregard past wrongs and start anew."

"Confringo," Harry said automatically, but his mind was reeling with shock. "You – are trying to recruit me?"

"We are presenting a chance at reconciliation," the blond evaded, jumping out of the way of an exploded tree trunk with agility surprising for a man his size.

The Death Eaters hadn't been truly trying to injure Harry, now that he thought back to their spells; they had mostly fired harmless curses aimed at disabling him from fighting. Still, the idea that they just wanted to talk to the Boy-Who-Lived was preposterous.

"You must listen to us," the blond declared, wincing as he jarred his injured arm.

"Talk, then," Harry said curtly. "If that's what you really want to do."

He maintained the shield about himself and held his wand at the ready. Looking closer at his adversaries, he saw that neither of these men had been present at Voldemort's resurrection; he didn't think he'd seen them before, although the dark-haired one did seem somehow familiar.

"Of course it is," the blond affirmed. "We wish nothing more than to convey our Lord's offer."

"His offer," Harry repeated. "What offer?"

"The offer of peace."

Yeah, right.

"You see, Mr. Potter, as it stands, there is no denying some very grave altercations between you and the Dark Lord in the past."

"He tried to kill me, you mean," Harry said.

"And you tried to kill him," the brunet retorted sharply. "The world might not be aware of the Killing Curse the Boy-Who-Lived cast at the end of last June, but the Dark Lord remembers."

Was that a threat to expose Harry to the Ministry?

"Please do not take it as an insinuation of any kind," the blond hurried to assure him. "Such desire for self-preservation does you credit. Perhaps Dumbledore would frown upon your actions, but the Dark Lord understands."

He made a pause, presumably to let that statement sink in.

"And this is why he has deemed it possible to talk to you in a rational manner," he continued. "It is natural that you would attempt to kill a

man who is trying to kill you. However, if neither of you regards the other as an enemy any longer, there is no need for further conflict. The chance at peaceful life is quite within your grasp."

"In fact, the Dark Lord offers you more than just peace," the other Death Eater added. "He offers you a chance to fulfil your potential away from Dumbledore's stifling restrictions. He offers to teach you in the ways of magic you could never learn by yourself, and guide you on the path to power and knowledge, and become what Dumbledore would never allow you to become."

Funny, Harry thought as he stared at the Death Eaters, that didn't sound too terrible; the learning, and the peace, and the power he could grasp if he only chose. A life not haunted by the spectre of Voldemort, because Voldemort would cease to be the enemy.

Like that could ever fucking happen.

"And what would I have to do in return?" Harry asked, refusing to dwell on the bitterness of that last thought.

Because he'd been given the option to choose peace once already, at the end of last June, and he'd chosen life instead. And he'd known then that he'd have to fight Voldemort till the end, and he had no business hoping for a break now.

The dark-haired man smiled.

"In return, you would have to pledge to never use that knowledge against the Dark Lord."

"Pledge. Take the Dark Mark and join his – your – side."

"You have already been marked by our Lord," the man pointed out, nodding at Harry, and Harry's hand automatically flew to his scar. "And the struggle between you and the Dark Lord has never been a war of ideals, has it?"

"You have no stake in the ideological struggle between our Lord and Dumbledore," the blond Death Eater said. "It is not your place to



become the champion of Dumbledore's goals. You have nothing to gain by plunging yourself into a conflict that is much older than you."

"The Dark Lord," the other man said with an air of finality, "expects you to neither support our fight against the Muggle encroachment on our world, nor pledge your loyalty. The only pledge he requests is one of neutrality."

"Why?" Harry asked. "Why now? Why would he want neutrality?"

"You are not his real enemy, Harry Potter," came the answer. "The Dark Lord has no quarrel with you. He feels that there is no need for you to become his mortal enemy, if it can be easily avoided."

And this was when Harry knew that they were bullshitting him. Because Voldemort did have a quarrel with Harry – he'd tried to kill Harry as a baby, and then again in the Chamber of Secrets as a mere memory of himself, and Harry was the first guest at Voldemort's resurrection. Harry stood as the symbol of his continued failure and embarrassment, and he was the child of the prophecy, and –

Oh fuck, of course. The prophecy.

Harry couldn't believe he'd forgotten about it even for a moment. Voldemort wanted Harry to get the prophecy. Voldemort couldn't Imperius him, didn't want to fight him until he knew the contents of the prophecy, but he could try to win him over.

And he'd bothered to think of a tempting enough lure. If Harry hadn't been so sure Voldemort was intending to kill him regardless of the truce –

He liked to think that he'd have rejected the offer, anyway. But he hated Voldemort that much more for making him wonder.

Some of Harry's thoughts must have shown on his face, because the blond Death Eater spoke up:

"We will not take an answer now. We are simply here to make the offer, and it still stands, even if you unthinkingly reject it. You have not had the time to – "

Then, Harry heard the sound of running feet, and a voice shouted Harry! and a nonverbal curse went sizzling towards the two Death Eaters.

Harry glanced behind to see Remus Lupin emerging through a gap between two buildings, poised to fight – but the Death Eaters weren't going to wait for his arrival.

"Our conversation must be cut short," the dark-haired one said, giving Harry a meaningful look. "We trust that you will think on our words, Mr. Potter."

With that, both men Disapparated away, and Harry remained looking pensively at the spot where they'd just been.

"Harry! We've been looking for you everywhere," Lupin admonished, finally catching up to him. "What were you doing, Harry – talking to them?"

"How did you know that something was wrong?" Harry asked distractedly.

"Mundungus Fletcher was on the lookout, and he warned us." Lupin gave an exasperated sigh. "Instead of helping you, of course."

"Is that the same Fletcher who was supposed to be guarding me when the Dementors attacked this summer?"

"The very one. Come along."

Still deep in thought, Harry followed.

"What did they want, Harry? What did they say?" Lupin questioned, as they walked out onto the main street.

"Nothing much," Harry began, but then stopped and sighed.

Striding towards him and Lupin down the busy street was Professor Snape, and his expression boded nothing good. He was probably supremely pissed off about having to spend his precious time on searching for the Boy-Who-Lived, and Harry was sure he'd hear all about it in the immediate future.

From prospective Death Eater to errant schoolboy in a wink. Fortune was a fickle bitch.

"I will take it from here, Lupin," Snape said, eyeing Harry closely.

"Of course, Severus," Lupin demurred. "I'll let everyone know Harry is okay. Some of your friends seemed concerned, Harry. Miss Granger and Mr. Longbottom in particular – "

Harry started. He'd completely forgotten about the meeting he'd missed.

"Oh," he said. "Yes, I should see them – "

"I'm sure your fan club can wait, Mr. Potter," Snape said acerbically.

Harry was equally sure Snape's lecture could wait, whatever it was going to be about.

Snape didn't start shouting at Harry immediately, as Harry'd expected, and didn't really say much at all. Once they got to Snape's office, the man just tersely asked whether Harry had any injuries, gave him a piercing glance and uttered:

"Judging by your unharmed state, I presume that the Dark Lord had indeed decided to approach you with an offer of conciliation."

"Had you known that this might happen? Sir?" Harry asked at once.

Because if he had –

"I had known he was considering it," Snape said indifferently. "For your own sake, Potter, I hope you understand the spirit in which the offer was made."

"I'm not entirely brainless, Professor," Harry snapped, and took a deep breath.

He knew better than to rise to Snape's barbs. He knew better than to let Voldemort's offer rattle him. And he definitely knew better than to wish his life wasn't this fucked up endurance test, because –

Sometimes he feared he'd never quite fixed all that got broken last June, and that he'd fall back apart, if he let himself stop and doubt and wish for impossible things.

"I know the Dark Lord isn't to be trusted," Harry told Snape. "I'm not about to fall for his promises of power and glory – "

"See that you don't," Snape said, and something flashed in his eyes, and suddenly Harry realised that Snape knew what Slytherin was and what it made Harry, and that Harry had of course done some Dark Magic where the good guys couldn't see him, and that maybe he wouldn't tell, because Slytherins did stick together, but he'd had to check that Harry knew the limits.

Knew the limits, and remembered who his enemies were, and kept his priorities straight.

It was somehow disturbing to find that Snape had seen in Harry, for a moment, not the Boy-Who-Lived, but just another Slytherin who might be lured by the Dark. If the Boy-Who-Lived couldn't be trusted to stay on the good side, then who the hell could?

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Harry sat on his couch in the Slytherin Common Room, reading the Potions textbook and making notes in the margins. He had a test coming up and, although the techniques of making the Calming Draught sounded supremely dull to him, it was now or never – the Quidditch practice times doubled before the match against Gryffindor

in two weeks, at the start of November, and Harry had had very little time for studying. Besides, there was also the Transfiguration essay... and the duelling club lesson plans that he had to put together... he'd heard that sleep was fun, too.

"Harry?" Blaise plopped down next to him, ignoring the upholstery snakes' menacing hisses. "Prepare to rejoice, for I come bearing good news."

"I am all excitement," Harry muttered. He seriously hoped this wasn't about Blaise's crush on Katie Bell, because then he might have to kill Blaise, and he had no spare time for hiding the body. "Audiri Secus," he intoned, casting sound wards that would disguise their conversation from outsiders.

He laid his Potions book aside and turned to Blaise.

"My mother's finally sent me a Secrecy Scroll," Blaise said smugly. "And I hope you appreciate the effort, because Secrecy Scrolls are not exactly tradable goods in this country."

Harry leaned against the back of the couch and automatically petted the writhing snakes.

"You're right, this really is good news," he admitted.

Finally, the security arrangements for the duelling club could fall into place.

The Secrecy Scroll was in effect magical parchment, signing which bound people to silence regarding a certain secret – much in the way the Goblet of Fire forced the champions to compete in the Triwizard Tournament. There was one secret allowed per Scroll, and signing it constituted a binding magical contract. Once a person signed their name, pledging to honour the secret, they could speak of it to no one beyond the circle of people who'd signed the Scroll too.

At least, such was the idea. There were, of course, loopholes and limitations.

Most importantly, a Secrecy Scroll's effectiveness diminished the more people signed it; as it covered more people, its hold grew more tenuous. Also, the solution tended to work better on weaker, younger wizards, because, especially if a Scroll's influence was stretched thin enough, strong wizards could manoeuvre out of its grasp. It was far from an ideal security measure, on the grand scheme of things, but hopefully it would be sufficient for the duelling club.

"We'll introduce the Scroll at the next meeting," Harry said. "A few people shouldn't sign, of course, or else we won't be able to let new members in."

"I hope that, by a few people, you mean us, your trusted companions."

"Yeah, you, Millie, Cedric, Neville – the usual suspects."

"Ah, it is so wonderful to be among the privileged few," Blaise said dramatically, "who count themselves among your friends. The crème de la crème of the duelling club."

"Very funny." Harry rolled his eyes. "Now, if Hermione also manages to figure out that communication device she was talking about, we're pretty much set."

He took a moment to mull over what a happy state of affairs that would be and returned to his Potions book, only to be interrupted as Millie came into his line of vision and deposited her solid weight on the couch, too.

Harry muttered under his breath, including her in the sound wards.

"Malfoy and Nott are shouting at each other in your dormitory," she informed them. "Something about you, Harry."

Harry responded with a non-committal huh, noting down the techniques of making the Calming Draught.

"Probably about the fight Harry and Malfoy had yesterday," Blaise drawled. "It's not comme il faut for those dark and mysterious types

anymore, you know – our Harry is the sacred cow, to be treated with appropriate reverence."

Harry shrugged, still not raising his eyes.

Sacred cow was about right. In the wake of the recruitment attempt at Hogsmeade, the Death Eaters' kids in Slytherin had started courting him, with various degrees of transparency – most likely on Voldemort's request. Clearly, Voldemort wanted to reinforce the message of the worry-free life Harry would lead if he chose to accept the offer. Harry's relationship with the radical Purebloods and Voldemort's sympathisers had always varied from strained to outright hostile, but none of them would dare harm Harry now that Voldemort didn't want him alienated, which left Harry in a position of power.

Of course, that position was contingent on Harry not revealing his true intentions of rejecting Voldemort's overtures, but Harry could certainly do ambiguity if it bought him time. And he needed time off from fighting the Death Eater faction which he could devote to building his own power base among students – so that, when the temporary peace went to hell in a hand basket, he'd have a side to call his own, beyond the immediate circle of his friends.

Malfoy hadn't had an easy time of accepting Harry's changed status, but Nott was a different story. He'd been circling Harry since a start of year, offering a helpful comment here, an aloof opinion there, and a witty remark on top – all the while at odds with Malfoy, and evidently this particular trend was going to continue.

"It can't go on indefinitely, you know," Blaise said, stretching leisurely. "Sooner or later, you're going to have to declare a side."

Harry didn't dignify something so trite with a response. Of course he'd have to declare a side – Voldemort wouldn't wait forever, and things would probably come to a head even before Voldemort ran out of patience, if Harry knew the way rumours travelled at Hogwarts.

So far, Harry had managed to balance the contradictory messages he was giving out, because his anti-Voldemort face was mostly directed at the duelling club members, while his ambiguous mask was on

while in Slytherin. Outside both those environments, Harry was neutral and perfectly well-behaved, lest Umbridge catch a wisp of his leanings in either direction. However, there were Slytherins in the duelling club, and Death Eater sympathisers in other Houses, and whispers had the tendency to carry.

Thankfully, Harry was too busy to fret about the timing and trajectory of that proverbial other shoe.

"I mean, it might take a while," Blaise continued doggedly. "We Slytherins have never aired our dirty laundry in public, and, for what the rest of the school knows, we've always been a big happy family anyway. Incestuous, from what they say, but happy."

Harry snorted.

"Damn it, Harry," Millie exploded, lunging for his book.

A short wrestling match followed, which Harry lost. He glared at Millie, while she clutched the textbook to her chest with a triumphant smirk.

"What?" he snapped.

"I can't decide whether you're being honestly dumb or deliberately obtuse," Millie said. "You're not listening. Yes, we all know that you'll declare a side, and we – and take that to mean Zabini and I – know what side it's going to be. However, the rest of the school isn't like us, and they might not know."

Harry raised an eyebrow.

"The rest of the school might not believe me when I say that the Boy-Who-Lived is really, truly not a Death Eater?"

He had trouble envisaging that – except with Slytherin. With Slytherin, as usual, things were more complicated.

Harry wanted to project himself in Slytherin as an alternate option to joining Voldemort. Most everyone automatically assumed that Slytherins would become Death Eaters en masse – Harry had heard



that accusation thrown around even before Voldemort's return, and hated the stigma. Even he felt that the Order would have preferred the Boy-Who-Lived to have some other House affiliation, and he was possibly the least marginalised Slytherin of them all. Harry wanted to show his housemates that they had a choice, that they didn't have to be defined by negative expectations.

As the result of recent events, however, Harry seemed to be the poster child for young talented Slytherins who had a bright Death Eater future before them, and that was not an image he wanted to cultivate.

"I suddenly wonder – has it even occurred to you why all the bad guys think you'd make such a splendid bad guy along with them?" Blaise inquired.

"Because the Dark Lord told them to," Harry said drily. "I believe second-guessing him isn't in vogue."

"Ah," Blaise said, brushing invisible lint off of his robe in a gesture that screamed theatrical nonchalance. "But our hero is deluded."

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"What am I doing wrong?" Harry asked, lowering his wand in frustration. "I'm focused, I'm envisaging the final result, I'm – "

"Chill, Harry." Eddie Carmichael, a sixth year Ravenclaw, raised an eyebrow at him. "Nonverbal magic is difficult, okay? Getting worked up over it isn't going to help."

"Eddie's right," Cedric said brightly, addressing more than just Harry, now. "The key element to casting nonverbal spells is mental focus. And you can't concentrate on the spell you're trying to perform if a part of you is occupied by being angry about failing."

Harry and about a dozen sixth and seventh year students were in the Hidden Room, practising separately from the regular duelling club. They were the advanced group, which had formed organically after several duelling club meetings, when it became obvious that there

was a great discrepancy between older kids who were fairly skilled, and fourth years who couldn't do a simple Incarcerous. Naturally, not all older students were great at Defence, which was why the advanced group was so small. The twins, for all their brilliance at Transfiguration, Charms, and Potions, still attended the regular duelling club, and there were other students like them, whose talents lay elsewhere.

Harry was the only fifth year here. He'd initially contemplated inviting Anthony and Hermione along, but he and Cedric decided against it, because being clever was not the same thing as being skilled, and they both had a lot of basics to learn yet. They wouldn't be ready to start on the advanced stuff for a while.

And the stuff Harry was learning now, by mid-November, was definitely advanced. The sixth years were supposed to have started nonverbal spells this year, and, since Umbridge wasn't teaching them anything, it fell to the seventh years to instruct them. Harry had to work extra hard to catch up to where they were and study nonverbal casting along with them. Apart from nonverbal spells, they focused on curses, which was something of Harry's area of expertise, and soon were going to start on the Patronus. Despite being the youngest here, Harry was still nominally in charge – and coming up with a training programme for people who knew more stuff than he did was challenging, but Harry's whole life was challenging, so that was nothing new.

"C'mon," Harry said. "Let me try again."

"Sort of... clear your mind before you cast," Eddie advised, moving to stand across from him.

"Clear my mind how?"

"I don't know, you've done it before, haven't you? If you think back, whenever you managed a nonverbal spell, you were never worked up about it."

Harry took a deep breath. He imagined that he would have to face Umbridge, or Dumbledore, or someone else in front of whom he'd have to keep his cool.

Petrificus Totalus, he thought determinedly, pointing his wand at Eddie.

He felt that something was different this time, and then, sure enough –

"A-ha!" The curse bounced off of Eddie's hasty shield. "There you are! Not perfect, of course, but better than your first levitation charm."

Harry cast the Full Body-Bind again and again, trying to do it faster, and more efficiently. He'd slipped up a few times, when he'd let his concentration waver, but Eddie assured him that it was only natural.

"Fine, then," Harry said, in the end. "How about some curse practice?"

They set to working on Katalambano, a spell that created magical restraints on a person that bound them on the spot within an invisible shield. The advantage of this curse was that, unless one knew how to look for it, it was devilishly difficult to remove, since its outward symptoms had a lot in common with a Full Body-Bind. It also happened to be obscure enough for people not to think of it immediately.

"Imagine doing this nonverbally," Eddie said. "That would be super useful."

None of them managed it, though – Harry because his nonverbal casting wasn't yet at that level, and the others also because they were too unfamiliar with the curse.

By the time they left the Hidden Room, Harry was feeling about as energetic as a grated carrot, but he still trudged to the Library. He had a couple of hours before curfew, and, while his homework was done, the research was never-ending, and he had to squeeze it into his day while he still had time. Besides which, close to curfew was a good

time to be visiting the Library – most people tended to crowd it during the day, and at night only a few especially studious ones remained. People were less likely to notice what he was reading, then.

"Hello, Madam Pince," Harry said politely, ignoring the librarian's disapproving glare.

Madam Pince took his Restricted Section pass and examined it, checking for forgery, as she did every time Harry came here. His pass was perfectly legitimate, however – signed by Professor Sprout in the belief that Harry would be using it to look up serious texts on plant properties. Since Harry's grades at Herbology had been consistently without reproach for his entire Hogwarts career, and he'd passed every Potions exam with flying colours, Harry hadn't had a hard time convincing Professor Sprout of the sincerity of his intentions.

("Very well, Mr. Potter, I know that you're a responsible student, and Mr. Diggory speaks very highly of you, as does Mr. Longbottom – a very talented boy... I hope you'll put your research to good use...")

Giving Madam Pince a smile, Harry disappeared behind shelves. It was quiet in the Library, and books were whispering among themselves, rustling their pages and creaking restlessly. Harry's fingers ghosted over their spines as he walked past. Moste Potente Potions edged forward at his approach, and an oft-read book on the darker aspects of magic nearly purred at him in expectation, but he hadn't come for them, today. He wasn't looking for new spells, either, of any variety – those he could share with the duelling club, or those he only displayed knowledge of when he was in Slytherin.

Today, he was venturing into Blaise's area of interest – history.

Lately, he started thinking that Blaise had a point when he said that history was important, because knowing spells was good, but knowing your enemy was good too, and Harry just didn't understand some crucial things about Voldemort. He'd always accepted that there were some wizards who followed Voldemort and some who didn't, some Purebloods that did and some that didn't – but he'd never looked into why. Why Voldemort had managed to rise up as he

did, why people followed him, and how exactly Voldemort had functioned in the past.

Voldemort was clearly keeping tabs on Harry; it seemed to make sense to look into him in return.

Triumphalist Ministry-sanctioned literature, like *Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts*, was not what Harry was looking for. He wanted facts, yes, but he also wanted a look at the Death Eater's motivations. He wanted primary sources – any surviving pamphlets of Voldemort's campaign, records of his speeches, if any existed, and anything that might explain what lured allies to his side. He wanted books that were either unbiased, or biased in favour of the Death Eaters, because they were the ones more likely to give Harry a glimpse into their mindset.

Harry was gazing thoughtfully between *Mudblood Menace* and *State, Power, and the Politics of Change* when he heard a familiar voice from behind him.

"Potter?"

Harry turned around. Edward Montague was approaching him, his hulking form looking quite out of place in the Library, and Harry raised an eyebrow at seeing him. Montague's visit wouldn't have been so surprising last year, when he and other former sixth years had been training Harry up for the Tournament. After the Third Task, Harry's ties to his tutors had disappeared like they'd never been – they ceased to interact at all, except for frosty exchanges during Quidditch.

Until the recruitment attempt in Hogsmeade, that is.

"Montague," Harry said, matching the other boy's tone. "Fancy seeing you here."

Montague's eyes swept over the bookshelf in front of Harry.

"Interesting titles you're looking at," he said.

"Yes," Harry agreed. "Interesting."

Montague was quiet for a moment, and Harry waited for him to get to the point.

"That was a pretty good catch, in the last game," Montague said finally. "That Weasley twit didn't stand a chance."

Harry nodded. Ginny Weasley had replaced Dean Thomas as Gryffindor Seeker, and she could hardly compete with Harry with his years of experience and his Firebolt. However –

"So you've said after the match, Ed," Harry said.

It was late, he was tired, and they both knew they weren't here to discuss Quidditch.

"Yeah, I have," Montague said, and lost some of his awkwardness. "Look, Harry, I'll be frank with you. We got along fine last year, but then shit happened and I had to be careful, you know? We all had to. You know how things have changed."

"And now they've changed again and someone gave you a nudge to acquaint yourself with me," Harry concluded.

Voldemort was a pretty damn weighty someone.

Montague shook his head.

"That's where you are wrong. I mean, I get that you'd be wary of us. We're all wary of everyone, but I really do think that we'd benefit from having you with us, and it would be good for you, too."

"It sounds to me," Harry said carefully, "like you're inviting me to join your club, Ed. And forgive me if I find your willingness to do that a little... unlikely."

"Do you?" Montague flashed him a toothy smile. "I think you'd fit right in."

"I'm the Boy-Who-Lived," Harry pointed out.

Because that basically meant that he'd had a side in this war since he was one-year-old and didn't know there was a side to be had, and didn't that count for something?

"Yeah, you are," Montague agreed. "So what?"

They stared at each other.

"Whatever that title is supposed to mean," Montague said slowly, "it doesn't mean shit with you. Nobody in their right mind would call you the glorious saviour of light. Nobody – who knows you half as well as I do, and I know you better than most."

Harry shrugged. He wouldn't say so, but then, it was true that Montague, Pucey and Bletchley had seen quite a lot of him last year, and had had the time to form an opinion or two.

"I've seen the kind of books you read. I know that you don't like Dumbledore. And don't think that we haven't all noticed that, except Longbottom's bitch Granger, there isn't a single non-Pureblood in your circle of friends." Montague smirked. "Don't tell me it was an accident."

No. No, of course it wasn't, but not for reasons that Montague was thinking.

In Harry's early years at Hogwarts, befriending exclusively Purebloods had been a safe choice – in Slytherin, blood status mattered more than House affiliation.

He'd wondered whether the blood status of his friends would come back to bite him in the arse. It now seemed that it would.

"I'm not a Pureblood," Harry said, for the sake of argument.

"And when was the last time you'd been reminded of that?"

Harry blinked. He hadn't actually thought of it, but – in second year. The last time his blood status came up was in second year, before the whole Heir of Slytherin business. And after –

("Has it even occurred to you why all the bad guys think you'd make such a splendid bad guy along with them?")

With a sudden chill, Harry wondered how aware he really was of the way people viewed him.

"Right," he said, filing the thought away for later.

Much later. To be puzzled out with the help of Firewhisky, perhaps – Goyle still had the stash from their return-to-the-dorms party, and he could be bribed.

"What is more," Montague continued, "with us, you wouldn't have to hide."

"Hide what?"

"Anything."

Harry didn't like Montague's implication that he knew Harry had things to hide, but it was probably a stab in the dark. Montague couldn't have any idea of the secrets Harry kept juggling on a daily basis – from something as life-changing as the prophecy to his forays into Dark Magic, which his non-Slytherin friends were blissfully unaware of.

"Think about it." Montague clapped Harry on the shoulder, interrupting the pregnant silence between them. "I'll be ready to answer questions, if you have them. All right?"

"Fine," Harry muttered. "Fine."

Just spiffing, really.

"Come on, then," Montague said, glancing at his watch. "It's almost curfew."



So much for spending a productive evening in the Library. Well, at least Harry had figured out some titles he'd be interested in looking at.

Montague had evidently decided to wait for him, and they walked out of the Library together.

"I've been thinking about our game against Hufflepuff," Montague said, smoothly switching topics. "Your mate Diggory has been running the duffers ragged, and I have a feeling he's got a few new tactics lined up. He say anything to you about it?"

"No," Harry said.

"Well, he's up to no good, anyway," Montague declared. "And I'm going to – "

He stopped talking abruptly, but not because he'd thought better of his words – Dolores Umbridge was waddling towards them down the corridor, a bright smile on her face.

"Hello, boys!" she said. "Cutting it close to curfew, are we not?" She tut-tutted, wagging her finger at them.

"We were just heading back to the Common Room, Professor," Montague said deferentially. "It isn't curfew yet, and we were studying – "

"Were you, Mr. Montague?"

Umbridge assessed first Montague, then Harry, and Harry was suddenly glad for Montague's presence. He wasn't sure he wanted to know what would happen if he'd bumped into Umbridge alone in the dark castle. If she tried anything, he'd have to retaliate, and it wouldn't end well. This way, at least he had a buffer.

He should be more careful in the future, though.

"Very well," Umbridge said with a magnanimous air. "Run along to your Common Room. I am sure Professor Snape would be most displeased to hear that you'd almost broken curfew."

"Thank you, Professor," Montague said, apparently taking all negotiating duties upon himself.

It didn't help, because –

"Oh, and Mr. Potter?" Umbridge turned to face him. "I'd like you to come up to my office for tea on Monday. I feel that you and I should get to know each other better." She gave a cutesy giggle.

"Of course, Professor," Harry said, ignoring the sinking sensation in his stomach. "I'd be delighted."

Umbridge nodded at them, in the fashion of a queen dismissing her subjects.

"Delighted, are you?" Montague asked under his breath, when they were a safe distance away.

"Sure thing," Harry retorted. "I've always wanted to play 'guess the poison in your tea'."

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"Sit down, Mr. Potter," Umbridge said in such a sweetly welcoming voice that Harry wanted to bolt.

Instead, he gave a smile in return, and sat on the chair in front of her desk.

Really, he should have expected something like this. Umbridge and he had spent the last three months playing an exhausting game of cat and mouse. She suspected that Harry was running a secret organisation, but couldn't do anything about it, for she had no proof. She kept trying, with determination worthy of a better endeavour, to infuriate Harry into losing his composure so that he'd give her an excuse to fulfil the promise of pain shining in her eyes. Harry, for his

part, was careful to maintain a respectful façade and behave with the decorum of a paparazzi-fearing royal, while scheming behind her back. They both knew that this situation could not continue indefinitely, and something, somewhere, would eventually have to give.

"Now, Mr. Potter," Umbridge began. "I believe that you and I have many issues to discuss."

"I hope you do not find my behaviour in class unsatisfactory, Professor," Harry said.

"Oh no." Umbridge smiled. "In fact, you seem like a reasonable young man. It therefore saddens me all the more to know that you are ruining your future by persisting to spread ridiculous rumours."

Harry put an appropriately concerned expression on his face, trying to ignore the kittens mewling from decorative plates on the walls. Really, did Umbridge have to display her fetishes for all to see?

"Do drink some tea." Umbridge simpered, her eyes hard as flints. "Mr. Potter, I simply must ask – why do you insist on making public statements which you know to be lies?"

Harry pretended to sip from his cup.

"I'm sorry, Professor, but I am not entirely sure what you are referring to."

Umbridge narrowed her eyes, but her tone remained saccharine.

"Surely you remember that you have publicly claimed that the Dark Lord has returned, despite the fact that the Ministry knows it to be otherwise."

Harry carefully put his cup on its saucer and looked up to meet Umbridge's gaze.

"I am quite certain I have not made a public declaration of any sort, Professor. I hold the Ministry in too high a regard to contradict them in such a fashion."

Umbridge leaned forward, planting her bosom upon the desk. Urgh.

"Do you deny, then, that the Dark Lord has returned to life? Do you take your previous claims back?"

"I've just said that I don't recall making any claims, Professor."

"Potter," Umbridge said, her sweet façade crumbling, "do you or do you not believe that the Dark Lord has returned?"

"I do not think it is a matter of belief, Professor," Harry answered seriously.

The woman made a visible effort at reining in her desire to throttle Harry. She gave a very fake laugh.

"Forgive me, Mr. Potter, but isn't the Headmaster's wild tale of the Dark Lord's resurrection based entirely on your account of events?"

"I have not discussed this question with him," Harry answered. "You might have noticed, Professor, that he and I aren't particularly close."

"Yes." Umbridge nodded, looking satisfied. "I have noticed that. Quite prudent of you, Mr. Potter, to stay away from Dumbledore and his machinations. In fact, I would almost approve of you, Mr. Potter, if you did not insist on spreading vicious lies to scare other children."

Thank Merlin she did not approve; the idea of conforming to Umbridge's standards of a human being left Harry more than a little nauseous.

"I defer to your judgement, Professor," he replied.

Umbridge stared at him. He looked back at her. He could do this verbal slalom for a long time. His whole life at the Dursleys and then in Slytherin depended on being able to bullshit his way through.

"I see," Umbridge said at last.

Harry could tell that she did not, in fact, see. She, like many others before her, had expected a different Harry Potter – and the real Harry, who did not seem obvious and straightforward about anything, was giving her a headache when she tried to figure out how to handle him.

Well, good. Harry hoped her brain would combust from thinking too much and she would die in a violent explosion of blood and toad entrails.

And yet...

Harry was frowning as he left her office, because he was beginning to recognise that the situation was really twofold.

Thing was, despite all the trouble and danger, Harry actually profited from Umbridge's presence at Hogwarts this year, because Umbridge had unwittingly provided him with a rallying point – freeing Hogwarts from the yoke of her rule. Had the Ministry sent a more likable person to spread their propaganda, Harry would have had a hell of a lot more trouble defending himself against their accusations. As it was, Harry didn't even have to try hard to win converts, and the duelling club was thriving, with new members continuing to join. Moreover, many people felt that, if Umbridge was wrong about the way she had hijacked the school with her Educational Decrees, then Harry had to be right about Voldemort's return, even though one did not necessarily follow the other.

In that sense, it was almost in Harry's interests to keep Umbridge at Hogwarts instead of driving her out, as he'd been initially planning.

And then, there was another aspect yet to this convoluted picture. Forced to look beyond the antagonism against Umbridge, Harry realised that she was not actually his biggest problem. Together with Millie and Blaise, he'd once half-seriously contemplated ways to stage a nice little accident that would take care of Umbridge and not implicate them. Harry saw then that it would not solve anything in the long run: should they depose of Umbridge, the Ministry would send

someone else in her place. Someone, say, more personable and less liable to provoke the students. Someone who might be better than Umbridge at persuading the students that Harry was a nasty attention-seeking liar. Someone compared with whom Harry would not be a noble defender of Hogwarts, but a recalcitrant child.

To resolve the situation at Hogwarts, Harry would need to look higher than Umbridge. Perhaps, the Order had the right idea: persuading the Ministry of Voldemort's return was indeed paramount, because the Ministry, and not Umbridge herself, was the source of Harry's current problems.

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"Sonus," Harry muttered, aiming his wand at his throat, and then called for silence in the crowd. "Thank you," he said, more quietly. "Before we begin this session, I have an announcement to make. As you have probably noticed, our duelling club has become quite big – " There were a few scattered laughs at that. " – and we need better ways of communication than passing coded notes to one another in the hallways. I am therefore very pleased to inform you that our own Hermione Granger – " He gestured at the blushing Gryffindor. " – has created the perfect means for us to keep in touch. Hermione, if you would?"

The girl joined Harry on the makeshift stage and began explaining, picking up confidence as she demonstrated the way the fake Galleons worked. Harry was quite content to let her do the talking.

The duelling club had certainly expanded in size since its conception. At the beginning, Harry had envisaged that, at most, there would be forty people participating. Now, at the end of November, the population of the Hidden Room was somewhere closer to eighty. Of course, the influx of people receded once Blaise had procured the Secrecy Scroll, because not everyone and their mum could invite their friends to join anymore, but there was still a steady trickle of students eager to defy Umbridge and learn Defence.

And that made for a lot of people who depended on Harry to provide that opportunity for them, and were grateful to him for making the effort.

"Harry?"

Hermione had apparently finished explaining her bit.

"Right. Thank you, Hermione. Everybody will be getting a fake Galleon when we leave after tonight's session. Fine then, moving on – " Harry glanced at his notes. "This week we're back to defensive spells for all, since they're a large component of OWLs and NEWTs, and generally tend to come in useful. I'd like to ask anyone who's still having problems with the Shield Charm to stick with practicing that, though, because you just can't get around without it."

"If the Shield Charm is so wonderful, why do we even need other defensive spells?" Lavender Brown asked, pouting.

After all, learning the different counter-curses was a lot more interesting than drilling the same Shield Charm, Harry knew.

"Blocking incoming curses is essential, but sometimes you'll also need to reverse them," he said calmly. "And the OWL examiners will check that you are not completely helpless when faced with a hex that doesn't happily resolve itself with a Finite."

Neville gave Harry a small smile when he had finished giving instructions and got off the podium.

"Afraid I'm one of the people who can't do the shield properly yet."

"That's alright," Harry reassured him. "You'll get it down soon, you're certainly trying hard enough. Sorry, Nev, I'll be right back – "

"I'll see you after the session, right?" Neville inquired.

Since Harry and a lot of his friends were busy with various commitments this year, it was often easiest to find time to see his friends, especially ones from other Houses, after the duelling club

meetings. They'd stay after everyone else left, transform the Hidden Room from a training area to a pleasant sitting room, and catch up with one another. Harry's friends knew that he set this time apart to see them and often made an effort to clear their schedules accordingly, though it didn't always work. Millie and Blaise often skipped out, neither particularly enthused about socialising with Harry's other friends and generally spending more time with Harry than anyone else, by virtue of sharing a House.

"Yeah, of course, we'll be meeting as usual," Harry said.

Out of the corner of his eye, he glimpsed a nearby group of fourth year Hufflepuffs throw Neville envious glances at that, but he didn't have time to think on it – Cedric was waving him over.

"When do you want to hold the advanced group meeting?" he asked.

"I think everyone agrees on this Thursday," Harry said. "The advanced group has different fake Galleons, so I'll contact you through those if anything changes. Are you staying after?"

"Nope," Cedric murmured, watching as Luna cast the Choking Curse on Neville and Neville attempted to block it. "I've got Head Boy and Girl meeting with Dumbledore. Do you think we'll need to cart anyone off to the Infirmary at the end of this?"

"We haven't yet," Harry said optimistically.

The meeting proceeded in the usual state of controlled chaos – Astoria Greengrass turned into a canary thanks to the Weasley twins, Angelina Johnston was, by all appearances, trying to kill Lee Jordan, and Hannah Abbott, Tracey Davis, and Lavender Brown exchanged the latest gossip right in the midst of spell fire.

Susan Bones looked kind of lonely, Harry decided. It was only gentlemanly to approach her.

"You should do a slight flourish here – not too much, though, just like that..." Harry said, coming up to where Susan was standing.



Susan smiled at him. The cute dimples of doom were back, Harry noticed at once.

"Thanks, Harry. I don't know why I always get it wrong."

Harry smiled back.

"Lots of people do, so no worries. Um. We could meet up to practise, though."

"Aren't you very busy?" Susan asked, twirling her long plait between her fingers. "Would you have time just to help me?"

Harry gathered his confidence.

"Well, there's always the next Hogsmeade weekend."

He hoped that the din of the practice would drown out his conversation with Susan, because he really wouldn't like his private life to become a matter of public interest before said private life even materialised.

Susan cocked her head slightly to the side.

"Is that a date, then?" she asked.

There was no real flirtatiousness in her manner – she did not suddenly start blushing and stammering, and neither did she take on coy airs along the lines of Padma's. As usual, she appeared very down-to-earth and not dazzled by Harry's fame.

And, well, pretty. Which made her sort of scary, even though Harry knew she was really nice.

"Yes, it would be a date," he confirmed, hoping he didn't sound as awkward as he felt. "If you would agree, of course."

Susan's cheeks were a little pink as she said:

"Oh, I, well, I'd be glad to."

Harry smiled, breathing easier now that the trickiest part was over.

"I should warn you in advance that I'm terrified of Madam Puddifoot's Teashop," he said. "So, er, if you don't mind Three Broomsticks..."

Susan laughed.

"Don't worry, I will not drag you to Madam Puddifoot's!" she promised.

"So – shall we meet in the Entrance Hall on Saturday?" Harry suggested.

"Yes, let's," Susan agreed and gave him another smile. "I'll look forward to it, Harry. And thank you for showing me the spell!"

Harry would have liked to stay and chat with Susan some more, but the group's training hour was drawing to a close, and he still had rounds to make.

At the end of the meeting, Susan left with Hannah Abbott and Ernie Macmillan, and Harry stayed behind with his friends, as usual. They exited the Hidden Room and re-entered after requesting a comfortable lounge. Luna, Hermione and Padma barely noticed the change in décor, engrossed as they were in arguing about the magical properties of the Hidden Room; Terry and Anthony listened to the discussion in interest, offering comments when they felt particularly brave. Harry sat down on the couch between Fred and George.

"My noble-hearted friends," he said. "I've been thinking."

"And how did that go for you?" Fred inquired politely.

"It was very refreshing, thank you. As it happens, I was wondering – how is your product development going?"

The redheaded duo perked up at once.

"Swimmingly!" Fred proclaimed. "We have perfected the Skiving Snackboxes, thanks to young Neville and his Mimbulus Mimbletonia, and are currently working on a Portable Swamp, which should be quite a delightful invention."

"And let us not forget the Weasleys' Wild-Fire Whiz-Bangs," George chimed in. "On a more serious note, we're developing something called the Decoy Detonators, but they're not quite ready. We've also got a few interesting ingredients from overseas."

"In addition, we feel that there is a certain lonely woman at Hogwarts," Fred said, "who would greatly benefit from some humour in her life. And we do rather need test subjects – "

Harry raised a sceptical eyebrow.

"Come on, Harry," George said. "You said it yourself that you wanted to drive her out of Hogwarts. Why not have fun while we're doing it?"

"She's kind of grown on me," Harry confided. "No, really. I don't think I could go a day without seeing her bright pink robes – "

"Right," Fred said, and exchanged a concerned glance with George. "You haven't been taking any strange potions, have you, Harry?"

Harry sighed.

"Look. It's a long story – but basically, Umbridge is annoying is hell, but she's actually been very good for the duelling club's publicity so far."

"So you're thinking of keeping her," George said, unimpressed.

"For a while longer," Harry hedged. "Not forever. As long as she's not doing anything too damaging, and until she outlives her usefulness."

"Being your enemy must be so much fun," Fred mused. "I don't think I could think of mine in such caring terms."

"Well," George said, "for our forbearance, you owe us a little fun at her expense, Harry. Just a wee bit. Perfectly harmless. It's not like she'll run to the Ministry complaining about silly jokes – it's going to make her look like an idiot."

That much was probably true.

"Just be careful, okay? The fact that I want to keep her doesn't make her any less dangerous. She's just less dangerous, politically, than her replacement might be, that's all. So – don't get caught. I meant it."

"Don't worry, Harry," Fred said, blinking innocently. "Don't you trust us?"

"Does your mother?"

Harry's composure cracked at the sight of the identical grimaces on both twins' faces.

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"Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said, just as the Transfiguration lesson ended. "Please, stay behind."

Harry shrugged at Blaise and Millie, indicating that he had no idea what this was about, and walked up to the teacher's desk.

"The Headmaster wishes to speak to you after this class," the Gryffindor Head of House explained. "The password to his office is Fizzing Whizbee."

Harry wondered whether the summons had anything to do with the multitude of jokes played on Umbridge recently.

"Should I be worried, Professor?" he asked, giving McGonagall a sheepish smile.

The lines around her eyes softened a little even as she pursed her lips.

McGonagall liked Harry, as did most teachers. Harry was a good student, even if Transfiguration was a subject he struggled with; he was infallibly respectful; and he was the son of Lily and James Potter, who seemed to have charmed most of the teaching staff back in their student days. McGonagall had even expressed the sentiment that Harry should have become the Slytherin prefect this year, "in place of Mr. Malfoy" – said with a drawing of eyebrows, and a slight inflection on the word Malfoy that carried McGonagall's disbelief that he was at all suited for prefect duties.

McGonagall busied herself with papers on her desk.

"You are not in trouble, Mr. Potter," she said.

Someone was, though.

Prepared for bad news, Harry descended the stairs to Dumbledore's office and gave the password to the gloomy gargoyle. For the third time in his life, he found himself in a large circular room with a great number of mysterious instruments in it, some whizzing quietly and others puffing out little clouds of smoke.

The Headmaster was seated behind his desk.

"Harry," he said amiably. "Good to see you. Please, sit down."

Harry lowered himself into a chintz chair.

"I trust you are doing well, Harry?"

"Yes, thank you, Headmaster. However, I have Potions after this break, and I would really not want to be late." He made a slight pause. "There was something you wanted to talk to me about?"

"To business, then, if you insist." Dumbledore's expression changed imperceptibly; suddenly, his mirthful wrinkles folded into lines of sorrow. "A great tragedy has befallen the Weasley family, Harry."

Harry held himself very still.

"What happened?"

"Arthur Weasley... he's no longer with us."

"He's – dead?"

"His body had been found at the Ministry last night," Dumbledore said with deep regret.

Harry was silent for a moment or two, trying to get his thoughts in order.

"Was there a fight?"

"We do not know. Arthur had been bitten to death by a snake," Dumbledore said. "Whether there were any humans accompanying the reptile, we cannot be sure."

"A snake," Harry repeated. A snake biting people at the Ministry? "Was he on duty for the Order? Was he standing guard near the prophecy when – "

Dumbledore inclined his head.

"I'm afraid so, Harry."

The Sorting Hat sneezed.

"The Weasleys – "

"The Weasley children were sent to your godfather's home this morning," Dumbledore supplied. "I presume you are not averse to staying here until Friday as per the original plan?"

Harry assured him that he didn't mind.

He was not eager to return to Grimmauld Place earlier than needed; he did not want to intrude on the Weasleys' tragedy when it was still so fresh.

He'd rather not return to Grimmauld Place at all, actually, but he couldn't stay at Hogwarts unless he wanted to find himself in a near-empty castle together with Umbridge, and the Longbottom Manor was not safe enough at the moment, considering how much of a risk it was for Harry to appear anywhere.

Fortunately, Susan hadn't noticed the Order bodyguards tailing them last week in Hogsmeade.

By lunchtime, the news was splashed all over the newspapers; Harry hadn't had the time to inform his friends before they read the scathing obituaries, so most of them found out from Rita Skeeter rather than from him. Harry did, however, provide some explanations.

"Arthur Weasley was doing stuff for the Order when he died," he said. "Not that the Order would tell that to the Ministry, and the Ministry will not accept the idea of foul play, anyway. I'm sure they'll chalk it up to some accident."

"Or drown it in red tape," Cedric said darkly.

Most of Harry's friends were sympathetic towards the Weasleys. Not all of them, of course.

"One Weasley less," Blaise said with a shrug. "There's so many of them, do you think anyone will notice the difference?"

Blaise was, of course, not the only person at Hogwarts to ridicule Mr. Weasley's demise. Malfoy was getting a positive thrill out of the whole affair, and some others muttered ominously about blood traitors and what tended to happen to them. Dolores Umbridge gleefully informed the class that Arthur Weasley must have blown himself up on those Muggle devices he was so fond of.

And Harry would be lying if he said that he'd cared for Mr. Weasley, but he could sympathise with his children, and he found the vultures preying on his corpse unpleasant enough that he was actually glad to leave for Grimmauld Place, despite what was waiting for him there.

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The twins cornered Harry at once. He'd only had the time to put his suitcase down in his bedroom at Grimmauld Place and visit the loo when the twins pounced on him in his room, faces pale and something glittering in their eyes that worried Harry on a visceral level.

("No one will tell us anything. Dad died, and no one will tell us anything, as if the rotten Order matters more than he does – ")

And they knew that Harry would know. They advanced at Harry, desperate for an explanation, and Harry wondered for the first time if this was what Dumbledore experienced when Harry pressed him for information.

("We're not stupid, we know dad died doing stuff for the Order, but... snake bites? What was he doing that – ")

These were not Harry's secrets to share, exactly – and the one that was, regarding the prophecy, he wasn't going to share, especially not right now. However, the twins deserved to know more than they currently did. They deserved to know that their father hadn't been just taking a stroll through the Ministry, they deserved to know why he'd been there and why he'd died.

So Harry told them.

The twins absorbed the information in uncharacteristic silence. There were other things that Harry needed to say to them, condolences he needed to give, sympathy he needed to express through different means than telling his friends of their father's murder – but something in the twins' expressions checked Harry's tongue, and he didn't know the first thing about giving comfort, anyway.

"I'm sorry," he said at the end of his tale, and that was the extent it.

Next time he saw Fred and George, they were huddled with Ron and Ginny on the dark staircase and listening to Bill and Percy shout in the kitchen.



"Was dad running errands for Dumbledore when he died?" Percy demanded, voice tinged with hysteria. "Was he? Was he, Bill?"

"He wasn't running errands, he was – you don't get it, do you, there are some things worth dying for!"

"Then what has he died for?"

Fred looked at Harry over the top of Ginny's head, cradled against his chest. His eyes stood out, dark and feverish, against his pale face, and Harry could read the same question in them.

Death in the line of duty sounded noble, but what did it actually mean?

"Has dad's death changed anything?" Percy continued, after a moment of ringing silence. "This is what I told you about, we will all be ruined by this – "

"But don't you see? You-Know-Who really is back, and he's killed dad, and we were right all along, dad died fighting him and you – "

"I don't care that he's back, I care that dad trusted in Dumbledore's schemes, and now he's dead!"

Ron folded in on himself at that, hiding his face, and George laid a hand on his shoulder, looking just as lost.

Harry might not be able to express it well, or at all, but he did understand.

It was one thing to know rationally what war was. It was another thing completely to have it hit your home and destroy the safe haven you hadn't known to value until you lost it.

Last August, war had come to Harry's home, too, in a swirl of black cloaks and deathly breath; war had come to him, war had looked at him through the shattered hope in Dudley's eyes and he didn't understand it then, but later, much later, he'd stared the truth in the face.

He'd thought he was safe.

He'd hated Privet Drive all his life, but he'd allowed himself to think that the war wouldn't follow him there, that it would not find him in that insular world of gossipy neighbours and manicured lawns. He'd thought he was ready, firm in his decision to fight Voldemort, but he'd still ran from it all, and had been glad to have a place to run to.

He had no such place any longer.

Right now, in addition to dealing with grief over Mr. Weasley's death, the twins had to acknowledge the same thing – that, in war, there were no safe places, no untouchable people, and that someone was inevitably bound to get a shitty ending.

Harry would have spared his friends that knowledge if he'd had the chance.

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter.

A/N: As usual, sincerest thanks to my beta Gwendolyn, who has the patience of a saint. I don't know how she still puts up with me. Also, thanks to VotN for his quick and helpful response to my question, and of course to Mordac for looking over a part of this chapter.

It was quiet.

It was always so damn quiet at Grimmauld Place these days.

Harry frowned as he looked out of the library window. Snowflakes were twirling in the air, illuminated by street lamps, and the winter scenery seemed deceptively idyllic. Peaceful in its quiet.

The house was anything but.

The time of rage and mutual accusations had stormed by, culminating in an awful Christmas dinner a week ago, and the silence that descended upon the house instead had a deafening nails-on-a-chalkboard quality.

The Weasleys were still there, because it was easier for them to stay in London to take care of the formalities regarding Mr. Weasley's death, but they took to avoiding everyone. Once, Harry had built up the courage to knock on the door to the twins' room, despite not knowing what to say. They told him to fuck off, but he thought he'd feel like an awful friend if he hadn't at least tried.

Order members popped in and out occasionally, and Harry didn't know whether they were perpetually so discomfited these days, or the house affected them so, but those visits were rarely cheerful enough to dispel the persistent gloom.

The tense atmosphere was getting to Harry, too. He'd tried to study, like he'd done in the summer, but found himself unable to concentrate – and he didn't have the time for that sort of slacking off, but he didn't seem able to help it.

He took to wandering around the house, hoping to quell this restlessness. Last summer, he'd failed to appreciate the way this house resembled a maze of dark corridors, all leading up to closed doors.

He wished he'd gone to Neville's.

Neville wrote, as did the others, and their letters provided the only breath of fresh air during this Christmas holiday. Blaise's contained useful Ministry gossip between irreverently humorous remarks; Terry's waxed poetic about some theories Harry couldn't even pronounce; and Padma's provoked Harry's annoyed response. He'd realized only after he'd sent it off that goading him into showing emotion had been Padma's very intention, and nearly wrote another letter telling her that, if he didn't shout about what he felt on every corner, it didn't mean that he was having – problems, or anything.

The most unexpected bit of correspondence, however, was one that grew out of Harry's polite exchange of notes with Susan. They started off thanking each other for the lovely day in Hogsmeade, but then Susan hadn't given up on writing to him, and Harry kept replying, and by now he was beginning to realise that he hadn't actually known anything about Susan when they'd gone on their date, except that she was blonde and pretty and had a nice smile.

In retrospect, it was a startling thing to discover.

God only knew what they'd talked about during their date if Harry hadn't known until this correspondence who Susan's best friends were (Hannah Abbott, Ernie Macmillan and Justin Finch-Fletchley), or what her favourite colour was (yellow), or her favourite class (Charms). He vaguely remembered that they'd done a lot of giggling and awkward hand-bumping, which was really rather embarrassing to think back to.

Harry's fingers tightened on the Susan's latest letter in his pocket. She asked questions that were perfectly innocuous on the surface, but with Harry's life being what it was –

("So where do you live? Is it true that your closest relatives are Muggles? What is it like? What is your house like?")

As of this summer, Harry's living situation was a closely guarded secret, and Susan was trustworthy, but she wasn't this trustworthy. One careless word to her aunt, the mighty Head of DMLE –

Well, Harry would just have to lie. As far as the Ministry knew, he was still living at the Dursleys, and Susan didn't have the security clearance to be told otherwise.

Harry turned sharply away from the window and headed for the library door.

His feet carried him into the same drawing room he'd spent some time cleaning together with the Weasley children in the summer. It was significantly neater now – curtains Doxy-free, cabinets lacking ominous objects, and even the tapestry on the wall looking fresher.

Harry did a round of the room, mechanically stopping to look out of the window – nothing new out there – and then wandered over to the genealogical tree of the House of Black. He'd studied it numerous times before, of course; he'd never acquired the Pureblood ease with remembering people's lineages, but he did try.

Idly, Harry traced the golden threads connecting names together. The Bulstrodes were surprisingly close to the Blacks; the Diggories, on the other hand, were very far down the family line, and the Malfoys were a lot closer to the Blacks than they were to the Potters. Although... Funny, Black had stated repeatedly that it would have been his responsibility to take care of Harry after his parents' death. Was that legally the case? And if so, did it mean that, once Black ended up in Azkaban, the responsibility to take care of Harry would then be passed on to Black's family?

No. Surely not. That would leave the Malfoys as Harry's closest magical relatives, and therefore his likeliest guardians, should his case have gone to court.

How likely was that?

And yet –

Harry frowned, stepping away from the tapestry.

"Harry?" Sirius Black's voice spoke up from the doorway. "What are you glaring at?"

"Nothing," Harry murmured, still dwelling on the thought –

Could the Dursleys actually have been the better option?

Black approached Harry with light steps, then stopped near.

"Going stir-crazy, are you?" Black asked. "I know exactly how you feel. We're all shut up here, doing nothing – "

Startled by an oddly desperate note in his tone, Harry turned to regard Black with more than just a cursory glance. He noticed with some surprise that the man looked somehow more haggard now than he had in the summer. Then again, he hadn't been out in sunlight for how long now?

"Yeah," Harry said, for once feeling vaguely sympathetic. "There has to be something we could do."

Black nodded, then shrugged.

"Dumbledore visited last night," he said, after a moment's silence. "Informed us that there's going to be a meeting tomorrow, and we'll revise our strategy." Black grimaced. "Whatever the fuck that means. You're allowed to come, I suppose, if you like."

Harry would very much like. This, that the Order was finally going to make new plans, was the best piece of news he'd heard all week – and he let the anticipation buoy him through yet another dinner the Weasley family failed to attend.

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Harry's excitement did not last twenty minutes into the meeting. That is, truthfully, the plan did not sound all that bad, but –

"Headmaster?" Lupin asked with a slight frown. "Forgive me for questioning your judgement, but is it truly safe?"

"Don't be daft, Lupin," Moody snapped, hijacking Dumbledore's response. "Potter won't even set foot in the Ministry – all he has to do is sign a form requesting to listen to the prophecy, and that's it, the extent of his involvement. Won't as much as break a nail."

This was not, of course, what Harry was worried about, and Dumbledore probably knew it too, if the perceptive gleam in his eyes was anything to go by.

"On the actual day, it'll be me who goes, Remus," Tonks said. "I'll Metamorph into Harry, and they'll never know the difference until it's too late. The Death Eaters are not going to wait for me to pass the identification test at the Department of Mysteries – they'll be lying there in wait."

"Yes, but what if they do wait for you to pass the test?" Lupin insisted. "Voldemort won't attack unless he's sure that it's Harry."

"Or he might not attack at all," Black countered. "It's worth a shot, anyway – what other chance do we have to draw Voldemort out? If he thinks Harry is going to access the prophecy – if he's not sure the prophecy is still going to be there when Harry leaves – Voldemort wants the prophecy too badly to let this get past him."

"This is a plan that could work," Bill said, breaking his silence for the first time. "It could work, and it could be effective, and if we have to change the plan now, after Dad has already died because the old one wasn't working – " Bill broke off abruptly, turning away, and Harry thought that shouting matches with Percy affected him more than it appeared.

Mrs. Weasley gave a loud snuffle.

"It is only natural that you feel this way, William," Dumbledore said gravely. "And we shall certainly do all we can to make sure that Arthur's tragic death hadn't been in vain."

"We've let You-Know-Who lay down the rules for too long," Moody declared. "We've got to force him to react for once. We're not going to find a better bait than the prophecy, and the threat of Potter removing it."

Harry looked down at his hands, folded on the tabletop. The Order's plan hinged on the assumption that Voldemort would get alarmed should Harry lodge an official request to listen to the prophecy. As the only other person to whom it pertained, and who therefore had the right to access it, Harry was a good decoy – and Voldemort would definitely hear about the official request, the Ministry being the sieve that it was. If Voldemort thought Harry was on the Order's side, and plotting with them to remove the prophecy out of his reach, then he might be provoked into attacking before Harry was due to appear – the date being set by the Department of Mysteries, and likely to become known to him. Or else he could attack on the day itself, so as to take both Harry and the prophecy out in one blow.

Except that Voldemort might not be so easily lured. As far as he knew, Harry wasn't on anyone's side; he was, in fact, waiting for Harry to choose one. And if Harry filed a request to listen to the prophecy, Voldemort might fail to take the bait.

Or else he might regard it as a declaration of war and move on from Harry-courting to Harry-hunting, which was an even greater concern.

It was too early for this. Harry didn't want to declare his intentions so soon. This was much too risky, and –

"Harry?" Kingsley Shacklebolt said. "What do you think?"

I think that this will severely limit my chances of appealing to the pro-Voldemort crowd, Harry imagined answering. Because Voldemort might get, y'know, offended if I scheme behind his back.



Harry looked around at the Order members' expectant faces. Something told him it was not the best time for honesty.

"I'm not sure," he demurred. "It just seems to me that it is a little transparent. Not that I presume to know better than everyone else, I'm just wondering – Voldemort is not stupid. He's going to know that I would never file an open request to listen to the prophecy. If I truly planned to go to the Ministry, I'd avoid shouting about it from the rooftops."

"We will make a convincing pretence at covering it up," Tonks assured Harry. "We'll pretend that your form is top-secret-classified – "

" – and it's just our luck that dear Lucius has the Minister eating out of his hand, and is thus privy to all state secrets," Black said darkly.

"Still," Harry said. "I doubt Voldemort would believe that I'd be this overt – "

"And when would You-Know-Who have had the time to become such a good judge of your character?" Moody asked, both eyes boring into Harry.

"He is not," Harry said calmly. "It's just common sense that – "

"No, let's discuss this," Moody said, a touch of steel in his voice. "Do your doubts have anything to do with the interesting rumours I've been hearing, about you and some offers You-Know-Who has been making you?"

Harry's gaze darted to Dumbledore. He'd wondered why the Order never brought up the recruitment attempt, and now it seemed that Snape had not told them – but Dumbledore had to know.

"What are you implying, Mad-Eye?" Black asked, beginning to rise from his seat.

"Nothing yet," Moody said. His eyes were still fixed on Harry. "But if Potter doesn't answer – "

"This is not the time for us to fight!" Mrs. Weasley implored, looking frightened. "Alastor!"

"I don't know what you're talking about, sir," Harry said, ignoring her outburst.

"Alastor, you can't be implying that Harry would have anything to do with Voldemort," Lupin said firmly, as the other Order members watched wide-eyed.

Except Dumbledore and Emmeline Vance. It was always hard to say what they were thinking.

"Your paranoia is going too far, Mad-Eye." Black barked out a laugh. "This is Harry Potter you're talking about."

Dumbledore raised a hand in a quelling gesture, cutting off Moody's impending tirade.

"I believe we have strayed from our original topic of discussion," the Headmaster said. "Harry, I take it that you have no objections to the plan?"

All faces turned to Harry, clearly waiting for him to say yes.

Harry considered his choices. He could agree to sign the paperwork required for the Order's plan, and thereby publicly implicate himself in their schemes. Or else, he could refuse to sign it, having no justifiable reason to do so, and alienate the Order, who might then investigate his connection to Voldemort, and cause all sorts of trouble.

Rock, hard place. Tough pick.

"It would behoove us to remove any potentially harmful equivocations," Dumbledore spoke up, looking at Harry seriously. "A man can court many only so long before he is mistrusted by all. We all must choose, and for what we fail to do now, the price will become dearer in the future."

Harry frowned, ignoring the Order's confused glances between him and the Headmaster. He had a feeling that he'd heard same sentiment expressed differently by Blaise and Millie last semester, although he hadn't liked it then any more than now.

("We all know that you'll declare a side, and we – and take that to mean Zabini and I – know what side it's going to be. However, the rest of the school isn't like us, and they might not know.")

Dumbledore was saying that the seeds of mistrust had already been sown; that Harry could only push so far before his reputation became irreparably damaged; and that a lot of people would be against Harry if they thought he was not with them.

Harry looked around the room. Earlier, Black and Lupin had stood up for him against Moody's allegations; others were silent. They were still silent. Were they waiting for Harry to prove his goodwill to them?

Harry couldn't believe it, but Dumbledore was not an idiot, and neither were Blaise and Millicent. And evidence was right here, before his eyes.

He'd known from the start that stakes were high in the deception game he was playing. He just hadn't counted on failing to notice when he started to lose.

"Fine," he said, somewhat fatalistically. "I'll sign the paperwork. I hope that the plan works out well."

For all its inconvenience, it did sound like it might. Who knew, maybe the Order would indeed manage to lure Voldemort out. Then, the Ministry would be forced to accept his return and stop interfering at Hogwarts.

At least one good thing could potentially come out of this mess.

"Thank you, Harry," Dumbledore said, smiling at Harry approvingly. "Everyone else seems to be in agreement?"

Discussions were held, then, and concrete plans laid out, and adjustments made. Mrs. Weasley had to rush out of the room at the very idea that Bill would be going with the Order on a mission that would inevitably involve combat. Tonks was excited about her part, and participated eagerly in discussions on the logistics of switching her and Harry at Grimmauld Place before going to the Ministry. Black was adamant that he would go to the Ministry too. Lupin was equally determined that Black should stay at Grimmauld Place.

Harry watched the proceedings, torn between returning excitement at the idea of the Order finally doing something, and morbid curiosity as to his own prospects.

"Don't think you're in the clear, Potter," Moody said, catching Harry after the meeting. "The others might trust you yet, but your evasions aren't fooling me any."

"I'm not sure what I've done to deserve your suspicion, sir," Harry said.

He was even somewhat sincere. He and Moody always seemed to get on well in the past.

Moody eyed him shrewdly.

"You're a clever lad, Potter," he said. "And one of the better ones, except that I've been catching some rotten whiffs off of you lately, and you must have heard. I don't like Dark wizards."

"I'm not – "

"I'm not asking you what you are," Moody said. "I'm just giving you a fair warning, 'cause I like you. Check the company you keep, be careful with the spells you learn, stay away from the books in this house – and I won't worry about locking you up in Azkaban one day."

"Really, sir, I appreciate your concern." Harry smiled thinly. "But I don't plan on landing myself in Azkaban."

"That's the thing," Moody answered. "They never do."

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Hogwarts seemed unusually noisy and cheerful after a stay at Grimmauld Place. Back there, the volume of conversation rarely rose above that generally accepted in a mausoleum. Hogwarts, on the other hand, was a gathering of wild hordes in one enclosed space.

Harry was really glad to be there again.

"What's got you so happy?" Blaise asked from his spot on the couch opposite to Harry's in the Hidden Room. "Judging by the glazed and slightly stupid look on your face during dinner, things between you and Miss Bones are going well?"

"Oh, piss off," Harry recommended, grinning.

Things were going well. And Harry hoped they would stay this way, because, frankly, enough things in his life weren't so simple right now.

While being back at Hogwarts was great, Harry was also feeling the weight of all his responsibilities after a stressful first semester and a Christmas holiday that did not really count for one. The duelling club required his close attention. There was research Harry had to do, both on Voldemort and on spells to learn. Hagrid was being threatened by Umbridge. The twins were being a menace to society. The pro-Voldemort faction in Slytherin was pressuring Harry to pick a side like never before, and he was running out of things to say to them. Mindful of the way he'd supported the Order's plan, Harry was waiting for the repercussions of his acquiescence to hit them all.

Strangely, the teachers also expected Harry to go to class and submit homework. As if this was a school, or something.

"Zabini is just jealous," Millie proclaimed, returning Harry's attention to the present. "Katie Bell got together with Ed Carmichael, you see. From Ravenclaw."

"It's a passing folly," Blaise said dismissively. "She'll come to her senses."

"I hear pigs are learning to fly, too," Millie remarked.

"Well, at least I have love interests – what are you interested in, except for your cat and your murder mysteries?"

Millie's love for murder mysteries was the only manifestation of cultural exchange between her and any of Harry's other friends; Padma introduced her to the novels while she and Harry had been dating, and Millie had even thawed to Padma for a while in the aftermath.

Millie opened her mouth to deliver what would undoubtedly be a crushing blow to Blaise, but then Padma spoke up:

"Oh seriously, Katie Zabini sounds awful! She'll never marry you."

Blaise bristled.

"I'll have you know that Zabini is a noble and ancient name – "

"Which suits very few girls. Face it: you'll be stuck marrying Astoria Greengrass, because only her name sounds half-decent when combined with yours."

"Yeah, because Padma Finch-Fletchley isn't stupid at all."

Finch-Fletchley: the new boyfriend. Harry wasn't sure he entirely approved of that.

"Stupid or not, we're together, and what did Katie Bell say when she turned you down?"

Millicent smirked. Blaise scowled.

A little off to the side, Luna and Hermione were arguing – or, rather, Hermione was trying to argue with Luna. Luna, for her part, was humming a merry tune and making Neville a necklace of Billywig propellers.

Harry did a swish and flick with his wand; the cushion he'd been aiming at rose in the air. Harry spun it mid-float, concentrating to maintain control; he let it fall and caught it partway, then did a little twirl and guided it down with excruciating slowness. According to the advanced group, he was getting good at non-verbal spells. It seemed that his relentless training in duelling over the last year was paying off; he really did pick up new forms of offensive and defensive magic more easily these days. In an ideal world, this would spill over to subjects like Transfiguration and Arithmancy, but Harry had no such luck. His skills at Charms, though, were getting better...

Looking up, Harry saw Cedric watching him closely.

"Is this really necessary?" Cedric asked. Seeing Harry's raised eyebrow, he added: "You pushing yourself so hard, I mean. Not that being hard-working is a bad thing, but how long can you do that for? You're already practising with us for the Defence NEWT – "

Harry felt his expression harden.

"I don't need to pass the NEWT – I need to defeat Voldemort."

Cedric looked stricken.

"Eventually, maybe, but you can't expect to fight him now! You're in your fifth year, you're too young to devote your life to training like you'll never get another chance – "

"Cedric, the first time Voldemort tried to kill me, I was one. He was also pretty serious when he threw the Killing Curse at me last year. How important do you think my age is?"

Harry gave an aggressive jab with his wand, and the cushion catapulted to the side, narrowly missing Hermione's head. The girl turned around to glare at Harry for a moment.

"I don't think many other students – even those in the duelling club – take everything as seriously as you do," Cedric said as the cushion flew back into Harry's hand.

"Well, I would have to, wouldn't I?" Harry muttered.

Of course, Cedric didn't know about the prophecy, so he couldn't understand how urgent it was for Harry to get strong enough. Harry would tell him, and his other friends, eventually. When the time felt right.

Cedric gave Harry a sharp glance, but refrained from saying anything. Not one to pry, Cedric. Harry liked people with tact.

For a while, they listened in silence as verbal sparring between Blaise, Millie and Padma continued. Then, Cedric sighed.

"There was actually something I wanted to talk to you about."

Why did Harry have a feeling it wasn't going to be good?

"The Weasleys," Cedric clarified, confirming Harry's premonition. "I hate Umbridge as much as the next person, but there are things that, as Head Boy, I just can't condone. Premeditated murder is one of them."

"It wasn't really a murder attempt," Harry said. "I'm sure the twins didn't realize that imbuing Ton-Tongue Toffee with a Babbling Beverage – "

" – might be a little dangerous and might result in her near death?" Cedric suggested. "Give me some credit here. Umbridge escaped through sheer dumb luck."

"It could have been Peeves," Harry said.

"And I could be an Arabian sheikh. But I don't think so."

It was Harry's turn to sigh. At least, the twins hadn't been convicted of the crime; however, Harry wasn't sure that they'd manage to evade prosecution for long, especially since they didn't show any willingness to stop their anti-Umbridge crusade.



Last semester, it was all fun and games – Limerick Laxative in Umbridge's tea, her hair dyed pink, her office filled with dung. This semester, Umbridge got personal with her insinuations about Arthur Weasley's death, and the Weasleys weren't known for their excessive patience. How Ron and Ginny were holding up, Harry wasn't sure, but the twins had upped the ante in their guerrilla war against Umbridge.

Harry didn't have anything against it, really. Umbridge was rapidly tipping the scales in favour of chucking her out of Hogwarts after all – especially now that she was threatening Hagrid and provoking the twins. If the twins let off some steam and drove Umbridge away in one sweep, Harry wasn't one for complaining.

Clearly, though, something as blatant as a murder attempt was going to alarm even the most tolerant of observers.

"I've let it all go on for longer than I should have already," Cedric said. "I've turned the other way last semester, and I've done nothing now even though I know who's behind things. But they're going too far, and – "

"Their father – "

"Harry, I understand and sympathize, but I have responsibilities towards this school, and I can't in good conscience ignore them any longer."

"Yeah, I know," Harry said tiredly. "But what do you want me to do, exactly?"

"Talk to the twins," Cedric stated. "Try to make them see sense."

Harry snorted.

"Like they would listen to me."

"You used to have a measure of control over them in the past," Cedric said. "I think you might still."

The idea was so ludicrous Harry didn't know where to begin refuting it.

"I'm just saying, Harry – " Cedric shook his head. " – if you don't do anything about the twins, I will have to, in my official capacity. And I'd really, really rather not."

"Yeah," Harry said. "Thanks for the warning. I'll figure something out."

Because he'd have to, and wasn't that how things always worked?

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"Look, I do know how you feel," Harry said, manoeuvring between pieces of a shattered chandelier that littered the hallway. "But there's a line here somewhere and I have a feeling you might soon cross it."

"The line between what and what?" George inquired, sidestepping a pile of broken crystal.

"Between pranking and homicide," Harry said bluntly.

And that chandelier nearly falling on Umbridge's head? That was very close to homicide.

"Umbridge could go hang," Harry continued, anticipating the twins' question. "It's your unconquerable souls I'm worried about, because these kinds of jokes tend to be rewarded by a vacation with Dementors for company, which is not what we're aiming for, here."

"Pretty words." Fred sneered. "But you basically want us to quit. Leave Umbridge alone and behave like good little boys. That's gonna work real well, Harry."

"I want you to stop putting yourselves in danger. You're not stupid enough to think that you'll keep getting away with everything, are you? It's not like people don't know who's behind the pranks."

"They've got no evidence," George said.

"No evidence?" Harry repeated. "You've used products on Umbridge that are recognisably yours. Who else at this school invents shit on the scale that you do?"

"Our products are for sale," Fred said coldly. "Anyone could buy them and use them on Umbridge. Once again: there's no proof."

"But everybody knows," Harry persisted.

Apart from Cedric, he'd already received hints from Snape and Dumbledore that they expected something to be done about the twins. It was an open secret that they were behind the mayhem, and there came a point when hard evidence wasn't needed to convict someone; past history spoke against them.

Like in Harry's second year, with Hagrid. There'd been no direct clues, but Hagrid had been sent to Azkaban based on his behaviour decades before. The twins were notorious pranksters; it did not recommend them now.

"Quit with the dark predictions." Fred shrugged airily. "Nothing's happened yet."

Harry gave him a hard look.

"Don't make me regret sticking up for you all this time."

"Really been putting your neck on the line, have you?" George snapped.

"If you like, I can tell Cedric that you're not listening to me and he's free to take disciplinary action against you," Harry offered. "I can also inform the teachers that they can stop waiting for me to be a good influence on you. I mean, I'm trying to help, but I don't have to take shit from you and for you, you know?"

Harry contemplated letting the twins just crash and burn by themselves, without worrying about their situation. He imagined giving up the responsibility over the duelling club to someone else, and forgetting to worry about Umbridge, and – whatever, screw

dealing with Voldemort, he was just a fifteen-year-old kid and what did he know, right?

Right.

That had been a liberating two seconds.

The twins were looking a little uncomfortable. Harry hoped his message had sunk in, but their first words were not what he'd expected.

"Are you okay?"

Harry stared at them.

"I – yeah?"

"Are you asking us or telling us?" Fred inquired, with something that almost looked like a smile.

Harry shrugged.

For a few paces, they walked towards the Great Hall in silence. Then, Fred gave a sigh.

"How the fuck do you do it? I mean, Umbridge's been at you the whole year. Do you just not care, or – "

Harry rolled his eyes.

"Hello," he said pleasantly. "My name is Harry Potter. You might have heard of me – according to the Daily Prophet, I've been arrested for the illegal possession of a flying carpet two days ago. The Quibbler, on the other hand, brings good news – it seems that my old Chinese opera troupe is accepting me back with open arms. Witch Weekly suggests that I have recently taken up with a harem of Brazilian beauties. I quite like that development in my life."

The twins shared a look of – was it amusement?

"Yeah, okay, we get it," George said. "No need to recount your other illustrious achievements."

"I'm not sure Susan will approve of those Brazilian wenches, though," Fred added. "I'd keep them hushed up if I were you."

"Yeah," Harry said. "Sure thing."

And, for a moment, it almost seemed that things were normal between them.

They parted at the Great Hall doors; the twins went off to the Gryffindor table, and Harry joined his breakfasting housemates, hoping that the twins would bear in mind at least something he'd said to them.

Blaise hardly even raised his head from food at Harry's approach – nothing, up to and including the end of the world, got between Blaise and his breakfast – but Millie gave Harry an amicable nod.

"Any progress?" she inquired, gesturing vaguely towards the Gryffindor table.

"We'll see."

Harry was reaching for pumpkin juice when owls flew en masse into the Great Hall, filling the air with the sound of flapping wings and hoots of greeting.

"Here we go," Millie said, catching the Daily Prophet from her postal bird.

Hedwig arrived a few seconds later, carrying a note from Hagrid in addition to the newspaper. Harry shared some bacon with Hedwig, stroked her pretty wings and penned a quick reply to Hagrid, promising to visit him soon.

In his copious free time, as it were.

By the time Harry reached for the paper, Millie was already deeply engrossed in the front-page article, and scowling at it with alarming ferocity.

Mass breakout from Azkaban, proclaimed the headline. Ministry fears Black is "rallying point" for old Death Eaters.

Black was having a lot less fun than the Ministry thought.

Harry quickly scanned through the article, absorbing the most relevant bits. It seemed that the other shoe he'd been waiting for had finally fallen; he'd been on edge for the last couple of weeks, expecting Voldemort to give a reaction to the Order's schemes. Harry had no doubt that Voldemort would have heard about Harry's request to listen to the prophecy within days of it being lodged, and Voldemort's silence had grated on his nerves.

Still, Harry was unsure that the timing for the Azkaban breakout hadn't been coincidental. The breakout would require effort, and it must have been planned in advance. Besides which, Voldemort had said even back at the graveyard last June that he'd release his followers from Azkaban. Of course, he might have moved up his plans after hearing about Harry's request, all the same.

Ten of the most dangerous Death Eaters joining Voldemort's ranks.

Shit.

Harry felt the weight of people's looks on him, and looked up to see Montague, Nott and a few others observe him carefully. Waiting for him to show a reaction. After all, if he was considering joining Voldemort, he was supposed to take this as good news.

Harry checked his expression, and hoped that his blank mask hadn't slipped while he'd been reading the article.

He smiled at Montague in greeting.

Montague frowned.

Harry cocked an eyebrow.

Montague shook his head.

The silent conversation could probably have gone on for a while, reaching dizzying intellectual heights, but then Harry saw a commotion at the Gryffindor table out of the corner of his eye. He turned just in time to watch Neville storm out of the Great Hall, Hermione hot on his heels.

"What – "

"This," Millie said, and pointed to the picture of Bellatrix Lestrange in the newspaper.

Harry had not paid attention to the caption until now. Apparently, he really should have.

Bellatrix Lestrange, it said next to the portrait of a scowling dark-haired witch. Convicted of the torture and permanent incapacitation of Frank and Alice Longbottom.

"Torture and permanent incapacitation," Harry repeated, despite himself.

He had known that Neville's parents were long-term residents of St. Mungo's, and that Neville got solemn whenever Death Eaters came up, so did that add up to torture until permanent incapacitation?

"What?" Blaise asked, startled enough to abandon his breakfast for a moment. "Did I hear something about torture?"

"Here," Harry said, thrusting the newspaper at Blaise. "See for yourself."

Harry hadn't dealt well when the presumed murderer of his parents had escaped from Azkaban. Neville was a good person, and surely he wouldn't sink to the depths of hatred that Harry had felt. Still –

"I should go after him," Harry said, pushing his plate away.

"Not so fast," Millie said, grabbing his arm. "I think you might want to direct your helpful urges elsewhere. Have a look at your dear girlfriend."

Harry glanced at Susan and saw that she seemed to be wilting under the curious and pitying gazes of her Hufflepuff classmates.

"Leonard Travers," Blaise informed Harry, pointing at his newspaper. "Killed Bones's uncle and his family, it turns out. Oh dear, Harry, whomever of your miserable companions are you going to comfort – the damsel or the Gryffindor?"

"I'd choose the damsel," Millicent said clinically, and lowered her voice. "Longbottom's got Granger to get on his nerves right now, and going for Bones looks like it's more about romance than about politics."

"I'm glad I have your blessing," Harry murmured, and got up from the table.

Neville had removed himself from the vicinity, and he did have Hermione right now. Susan, on the other hand, was still here and was clearly uncomfortable. Harry knew how public scrutiny could aggravate a personal crisis, and if there was anything he could do to help –

"Harry?" For the first time since their relationship started, Susan greeted him with less than a brilliant smile.

She was probably not sure that he could say anything worthwhile, which was fair enough – Harry wasn't either.

"Yeah, I just thought – how about we take a walk?" he suggested, ignoring the suspicious looks of Ernie Macmillan and Hannah Abbott, who seemed to be ready to pounce on him if he upset Susan any further. "There's still time until class –"

"Yes, let's," Susan said, sounding relieved.



Harry would have preferred to take her outside – he always seemed to find some calm in walking around Hogwarts grounds, or watching the lake – but it was really cold and they didn't have their outdoor clothes. Instead, they ended up walking slowly to Susan's next class.

Harry didn't know whether he should take Susan's hand, or hug her, or try to ask her about her uncle. Their relationship hadn't yet progressed to the point of poignant discussions, and this would be a damn unfortunate first one to have.

"I didn't know who killed Uncle Edgar, and Aunt Lucy, and my cousins," Susan said suddenly, breaking the silence. "And now that I do, I'm not sure what I should feel. I've never really hated anyone, but it seems that now, maybe I should start."

Harry wondered whether Neville had known about Bellatrix Lestrange before today. Whether he was teaching himself to hate her now.

Right this moment, Harry also felt that he had to say something deep and comforting to Susan, but he was woefully unqualified for such a task.

"You don't have to hate Travers to hate what he'd done," he offered, in the end.

Susan nodded pensively, and didn't say anything else until they reached the Transfiguration classroom. Then, she turned to him.

"Thank you for not asking whether I am all right," she said, looking Harry in the eyes.

Harry grimaced. It was a pointless question; of course she wouldn't be all right. However –

"Are you?" He raised an eyebrow, and Susan gave him a small smile.

"I am, actually," she said, and slid her hand into his. "I just need some time to think, but I'll be fine. It's mostly the sympathy from others that –"

She broke off, biting her lip, and Harry squeezed her hand.

"I know. But don't let it bother you, okay?"

She smiled.

"Okay."

The footsteps of approaching students broke the intimacy of their conversation, and, waking up to the lateness of the hour, Susan urged Harry to rush to his class. Harry'd had to run all the way to History of Magic, and Blaise smirked at him in a really annoying way when Harry finally got there, but he felt it was definitely worth it.

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Neville, of course, was a problem on a whole new level.

Harry watched, frowning, as Neville cast spell after spell with teeth-gritted determination. Hermione was Neville's partner in the duelling club today, but she seemed to be thinking better of the idea fifteen minutes into the session. Hermione was much more skilled, but Neville's single-mindedness was unnerving.

Harry was still not sure that the talk he'd had with Neville would be beneficial in the long run.

Once Harry had found Neville, using the Marauder's Map to navigate to Neville's hideout by the lake, he'd told Harry that Bellatrix Lestrange and her husband had tortured his parents into insanity with the Cruciatus Curse. Neville sounded almost detached as he related this, while clearly becoming quite consumed by the thought of taking revenge on the Lestranges. Harry had never noticed a malicious streak in Neville before and didn't think it suited him.

("I will meet Bellatrix one day and then she'll be the one crying for mercy... I hate her.")

Neville's attitude reminded Harry so much of himself back in third year, when he'd been hell-bent on confronting Sirius Black, that he'd

had to bite his tongue in order to refrain from uttering words of caution. Having been there, Harry knew that Neville didn't need to hear empty platitudes – he needed an outlet for his anger, which Harry could provide for him in the duelling club.

And then, listening to Neville, Harry'd made a decision. He'd weighed it carefully as he stood next to Neville at the lake's frozen shore. Finally, he'd figured that there would never be a better time, or a better reason.

So he'd told Neville about the prophecy.

He felt that, if he hadn't told, it would almost constitute lying; the prophecy had played a huge part in Neville's life, and determined his childhood no less than it had Harry's, and if anyone deserved to know, it was Neville. He had the right to know why his parents had been sought out that night. Why the Longbottoms had been the Death Eaters' immediate target. What information Alice and Frank Longbottom had been tortured for.

At first, Harry had thought that Neville didn't hear him, or didn't understand, so still and silent he remained.

Then, Neville had let out a shuddering breath.

("It could have been either one of us, but instead it's going to be both. You might be the one to kill Voldemort, but I'll be there every step of the way. And I'll kill the Lestranges.")

And the thing was – Harry ought to be happy that Neville was suddenly taking the war seriously. However, it didn't seem right to him that Neville should be so motivated by hatred; Harry could admit to being worried, and he wasn't sure whether it was hypocritical of him to feel this way. He wanted Neville to be serious about the war, but he wanted him to be serious for the right reasons – even though he wasn't sure his own reasons were any better, or that he had any business wanting to shield Neville from the ugliest sides of the war.

Neville. And Susan. And the twins. And –

If Harry tried to protect all his friends, he'd have no one fighting beside him, and it made for an unfortunate vicious circle he'd recently started wondering about.

Closer to the present, one of Neville's over-powered spells went sideways and hit Lisa Turpin; instead of falling into a faint, Lisa grew giant mushrooms on her head. She screamed. Hermione rushed to help. Someone laughed.

Harry rubbed his forehead and wondered whether he wanted to deal with it right now.

"I'll take care of the mushrooms," Cedric murmured, walking past Harry. "I think you should diffuse the situation with Greengrass, though."

"Good idea," Harry agreed, and looked around the Hidden Room in search of that particular situation.

Older students were practising the Blasting Curse, while younger were busy with the Impediment Jinx. Some seemed to be doing more laughing and fooling about than working – regarding the duelling club as the time to freely socialize with other Houses – and others were appropriately diligent. Finally, Harry spotted clear signs of an argument taking place, and walked over to where the diminutive Astoria Greengrass was facing off her Hufflepuff year mate.

" – completely unfair – "

" – shouldn't have tried to trip me up – "

"What seems to be the problem?" Harry cut in smoothly.

"She used some evil curse on me!" the Hufflepuff said at once. "Look!"

Trying to recall the boy's name – Derek something – Harry glanced at the hand the boy thrust at him. The fingers had gone all limp; it looked as if all bone and muscle had been removed, but Harry was reasonably sure Astoria could not yet cast such a spell.

No, it looked more like an ordinary Jelly-Fingers Curse, which was, to be fair, not that ordinary. And not something Astoria should have cast, unless she wanted trouble. It was knowing spells like these that made Slytherins come off as mean little bullies half the time.

Harry turned to Astoria, and she coloured slightly under his reproachful gaze.

"He tried to trip me up! I'd have fallen really hard if Prissy and Wendy hadn't caught me," the blonde girl protested, gesturing to her friends. "He doesn't like Slytherins, I heard so!"

Harry muttered under his breath, reversing the jinx.

"Let's avoid incidents like this in the future, shall we?" he asked and raised an eyebrow at Astoria.

"Yes," she said, visibly biting down on the sir.

Harry had thought he'd stomped out the younger years' urge to address him formally; he was neither that venerated, nor – surely – that scary. According to Blaise, it didn't help that Astoria and her Slytherin yearmates did not remember Harry as a quiet little firstie – their initial impressions of him included the near-strangulation of Malfoy with the Parseltongue couch, and that clearly made for lasting impact.

Derek-something smirked at the downcast-looking Astoria.

Harry gave him a pleasant smile.

The boy stopped smirking and looked vaguely alarmed.

"If you have a problem with Slytherins," Harry said, still maintaining the friendly façade, "I'd rather you took it up with me. So that we avoid unnecessary miscommunication. Was there anything you wanted to say?"

For a moment, it looked as if Derek's sense of self-preservation would triumph over pride, and he'd leave the scene. However, the cluster of people around him and Astoria thickened instead of dispersing, and backing out of the fight would mean losing face.

"Yeah, I – you say you're against You-Know-Who, but there are rumours going around, and how do we really know we can trust you or any other Slytherins?" Derek said, trying to appear brave.

There was a sudden hush, though Harry was glad to see it only extended to the immediate vicinity – most of the duelling club remained unaware.

"I don't see how your trust or lack thereof would relate to our House," Harry said nonchalantly. "Should I maybe start mistrusting Hufflepuffs on sheer principle?"

"Hufflepuffs aren't the ones who are all friendly with the junior Death Eaters," said Morag McDougal, a Ravenclaw in Harry's year. "I've heard some rumours too, if you like to know. And if you're really so against You-Know-Who as you say, shouldn't you have more problems with people in your House?"

"Not everyone in Slytherin is planning to become a Death Eater," Harry said, keeping a tight rein on his temper. "And I'd have thought that clever Ravenclaws, at least, would be above oversimplified generalisations." He cocked his head to the side. "Now, if you're quite done disrupting the session – ?"

His glare had been enough to silence the other protests – for now. Watching the people disperse, Harry was left with the feeling that he'd only delayed the inevitable facedown.

"That was close, wasn't it?" Terry asked from near Harry.

Harry turned around to see him and Anthony standing behind him.

"Close in what sense?"

Just in case, Harry put up a sound ward.

"We're not exactly dumb, Harry," Terry said. "I've heard rumours too. I've kind of been waiting for you to say something about it, but – "

"What rumours?"

"Is it true that You-Know-Who is trying to recruit you?"

"Is that what they're saying?"

The question was purely rhetorical, of course. Harry had known that this would eventually happen – the whispers of his recruitment would spread – but never would have been too soon.

"Yes." Anthony turned to face Harry. "So... is it true?"

"Kind of," Harry hedged. Then, glancing at his friends' expressions: "Well. Yes."

"Well." Terry looked away. "Fuck."

Harry shrugged. It could have been worse. Voldemort could have ordered older Slytherins to kill Harry, and Harry was not at all sure he'd have lived to see today if that were to happen.

Still, he figured Terry and Anthony wouldn't see it like that. Most people wouldn't see it like that.

"Do some people actually believe I might join Voldemort?"

"How would we know?" Anthony said, uncharacteristically snappish. "It's all rumour and gossip, but – why didn't you say anything? How long has this been going on?"

Harry shrugged.

"Long enough, but I've been dealing with it fine."

"Using it, you mean," Terry said. "Morag was right – you're using this as leverage in Slytherin, aren't you?"

Harry frowned.

"Just so we get it straight, why the accusing tone?"

"Don't you see that it's – " Terry grimaced, and exchanged glances with Anthony. "Pretending to be one of them, selling out your principles just to keep people off your back – "

"See, this is why I haven't told you," Harry said, interrupting him. "I'm sorry if it offends your sensibilities, but not everything can be solved by charging into an honourable battle."

Terry frowned. Anthony peered at Harry closely.

"You're not sorry at all, are you?"

"No."

"Thought so."

Harry clenched his fists.

"Would you maybe like to get off that high horse for five seconds? You don't know enough to judge."

"Of course we don't know!" Terry cried, suddenly agitated. "Because you're not telling us anything! You're not telling any of us anything, Harry, and how are we supposed to understand what you're doing if we don't even know what you're thinking half the time?"

Harry thought back to the Order and their mistrust, to Padma's admonishments and Blaise's warnings. Had he really been too closed off lately?

Lately – ever since the ordeal last June. Since the second Killing Curse hit him, since he gave up on joining his dead parents, since that cold feeling of purpose settled into his chest. But –



How was he supposed to talk about his feelings with anyone when he spent most of his time trying to avoid feeling altogether?

"Yeah," Harry said, blowing out a long breath. "I don't know. I'm sorry. It's not that I don't trust you. I just – "

"We get it, a lot of things have been happening, and you've been busy," Terry said and ran a hand through his hair. "Hell, you're pretty much single-handedly running this club, and don't think we don't appreciate it. Just sometimes, it seems – we see you, but at the same we really don't."

"It's not that I don't care, really – "

"We know you care," Anthony said firmly. "We can see that you're putting a lot of effort into – this club, into making sure Neville is all right, and the twins, and – you're doing all these things, but it doesn't have to be a one-way thing, with you doing everything. Let us in a bit, and maybe we'll be able to help."

Harry nodded, and tried to ignore the guilty feeling that arose.

There was still no way he was telling them about his forays into Dark Magic, and about how tempting Voldemort's offer sounded for a whole of two seconds, and –

Terry and Anthony had condemned even using Voldemort's offer to gain power in Slytherin. Would they – or many of his other friends – keep trusting Harry if they knew the rest? Harry wasn't at all sure, but somehow he was in no hurry to find out.

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Sitting on a chintz armchair in Dumbledore's office, Harry reflected that he was seeing more of Dumbledore this year than in all the previous years combined.

This time, Harry was here because his request from early January had finally been answered a month later: the Ministry had set a date for when Harry would be welcome to come and listen to the prophecy,

accompanied by Dumbledore as the adult of his choice.

In other words, the date was set for the confrontation between the Order and the Death Eaters, should Voldemort take the bait and show up at the Ministry.

Some of the document's details hinted that Voldemort would.

First of all, there was the problem of timing.

"As you see," Dumbledore said, pointing to the invitation that lay on the desk between them, "you will be allowed to listen to the prophecy on the fifteenth of March, at eight o'clock in the evening."

Which basically meant that Harry would be scheduled to arrive at the Ministry outside the Ministry's working hours.

"The Department of Mysteries is known for functioning outside the general Ministry regulations," Dumbledore informed him. "As the reason for that late hour, they cite considerations of your safety."

Harry was hard-pressed to believe the official document, and Dumbledore clearly shared his scepticism. It was much more likely that Voldemort, who'd heard of the request, had managed to arrange matters so that the Ministry would be nearly empty at the time of the potential confrontation.

After all, the fewer witnesses, the better, and what did Voldemort care that the whole point of this exercise was to out him to the general public?

Of course, it wasn't Harry who'd be going, it was Tonks. However, that brought them to the second problem.

"It says here that Ministry officials will be coming to pick me up," Harry told Dumbledore. Dumbledore already knew this, of course, but Harry felt like bringing up this rather important point. "What Ministry officials? You didn't mention anything about this in the standard procedure, sir, and this is really going to complicate everything."

"Standard procedure does not seem to apply where you are involved, my dear boy," Dumbledore said. "It is indeed not common at all for a Ministry visitor to be accompanied to the Ministry from their home. However, as I'm sure you can imagine, they cite considerations of – "

"My safety, yes, which I suppose means making sure that it's really me and not an impostor they're picking up?"

"I'm afraid so," Dumbledore said. "Voldemort must have considered the possibility of deception, and he is eager to make sure that the real Harry Potter arrives to the Ministry on the allotted night."

According to the original plan, Harry would go to Grimmauld Place before leaving for the Ministry; then, he'd stay there, and Tonks would continue on in his stead. If Harry were to be picked up, however, the switch could not occur painlessly at Grimmauld, for the Ministry could not be granted the Order's address. In fact –

"Tonks and I are going to have to switch at Hogwarts, aren't we," Harry said, resigned. "And it has to be after classes, because otherwise someone is certain to catch on that it's not me..."

There would be time between his last class of the day and the dinner to conduct the switch, although it would still be dangerous. Harry was sure that the pro-Voldemort faction would be warned in advance to watch his every step that day, and slipping under their radar would be very tricky – especially if Harry were to do it in a way that would not arouse suspicion.

What sort of a time frame were they looking at, again?

Harry glanced at the official invitation to listen to the prophecy. 15th of March, 8 o'clock, Ministry officials would be getting to Harry's location in advance to pick him up...

Harry swore inwardly.

In advance could mean anything, but, considering that Harry's appointment was at eight, it likely meant after dinner.

Could Tonks weather a dinner at the Slytherin table while pretending to be Harry to a bunch of people who would be watching like hawks for any abnormality?

He had the sneaking feeling that she might not.

"Sir," Harry spoke up, and raised his eyes to Dumbledore. "We might have a problem."

"We often do," Dumbledore said serenely. "The trick, if I may say so, is knowing how to solve them."

This particular problem, Dumbledore suggested solving by conducting the switch before dinner, but letting Harry's friends in on the secret so that they would provide Tonks with enough cover.

"Perhaps we would benefit from a distraction," Dumbledore said, making an emphasis on the word distraction that made Harry listen closely. "With the limited time we are granted, it could be beneficial for us if the student body had something else to focus their attentions on. And I believe that distractions are not a rare occurrence in our school as of late."

Harry had no doubt whatsoever that Dumbledore was talking about the twins.

Directing the twins' destructive urges to a good cause did not seem like a bad idea. In fact, maybe Harry could negotiate a temporary ceasefire in return for a sanctioned strike later. Marching off to see the twins, Harry had a feeling that they might just be interested in arranging for Operation Distraction.

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It could be that the date had been set by the Ministry, and so Voldemort gave new orders. It could be that it had always been the amount of time Harry would be given to prevaricate. Or it could just be that they got tired and bored.

Whatever the reason, the pro-Voldemort faction at Hogwarts had run out of patience to wait for Harry while he was making up his mind.

"This, Potter, is a Portkey, charmed especially for you," Edward Montague said, cornering Harry in his dormitory.

Harry didn't think it was an accident that Malfoy and Nott were lurking by the door, or that Crabbe and Goyle were waiting for them outside.

Harry took the proffered quill, knowing that it couldn't activate immediately – the Portkey wards over Hogwarts wouldn't let it.

"A Portkey where?" he inquired, twisting the quill in his hands.

It looked innocuous enough, but what promise did it hold?

"To a place where you can prove your worth," Montague said, smiling unpleasantly. "Or not, if you fail to take it, but that'll be answer enough, won't it?"

A test of loyalty, then.

"Depends where it takes me," Harry said. "I'm not exactly known for risking my life, doesn't matter what for, and I can't guarantee – "

"Don't even try, Potter," Montague said, and he was suddenly looming over Harry. "Don't you try to give me more bullshit about how you're not sure, and how it all depends, and how you have to think. Let me explain this to you. You can take this Portkey and prove that you're with us. Or else, you can chicken out of taking this Portkey, and prove that you're against us."

"But – "

"I don't care why," Montague persisted. "I don't care what your reasoning might be. You don't take the Portkey – we know what you're made of. No ifs, no buts, no extenuating circumstances. Black, white, yes, no. Foreign concept to you, I know, but you should be smart enough to grasp it."

Malfoy was smirking. Harry's fists were itching to hit him.

"When am I supposed to take the Portkey?" Harry asked.

"Use your brain, Potter. When could you possibly take it?"

Harry's temper flared.

"I don't know, Ed, you want to sound a little more welcoming here? Because it's you who wants me to go."

For a moment, Montague looked about to lash out, but then – to Malfoy's visible disappointment – he reined the impulse in.

"Valentine's Day," he said. "It's a Hogsmeade weekend, we'll be outside of the castle's wards, and nobody will miss you."

"Except my girlfriend," Harry said mildly.

"I'm sure she can find someone better to satisfy her," Malfoy said.

"And I'm sure you'll look loads better with your nose bashed into your skull, you want to try?"

"Cut it out, both of you," Montague snapped. "Potter, are your instructions clear?"

Harry contemplated saying no, just to fuck with Montague for a bit, because he didn't like being addressed the way he was right now. However, he also liked his face the way it was, thank you very much, and five-to-one odds – three-to-one, even, if you discounted Crabbe and Goyle – were not exactly favourable.

"Crystal clear," he said, instead. "Your oratory skills do you credit."

Montague squinted at him suspiciously, looking for mockery, but Harry kept his face perfectly straight, and Montague decided to let it go. Once he left the room, Nott followed.

"You'll get what's coming to you, Potter," Malfoy said, elated. "You'll be dead meat soon."

"Fuck you and the snake you rode in on," Harry told him. "Excuse me while I go compose my epitaph."

Really, though, Malfoy hit rather close to the truth. There was no way in seven hells that Harry was taking that Portkey on Valentine's Day, because it would likely take him to Voldemort, and Harry would voluntarily meet with Voldemort only when he knew he could kill the bastard. Seeing as Harry was not taking the Portkey, on the fourteenth of February Voldemort and all his supporters would know for a fact that Harry would not be joining them. Then, Harry would be fair game.

He had about a week of peaceful life remaining. That was nice to know.

Harry considered. Even if Voldemort would fall into the Order's trap and be revealed to exist on the fifteenth of March, it still left a month for Harry to dodge danger on his own, without the Ministry worrying about his health.

Perhaps warning his friends would be a good idea. And Susan too, of course.

Pity that Voldemort wouldn't buy date-with-girlfriend as a valid excuse for not showing up.

"I can't believe you're not more scared," Padma said, looking anxious.

She even refrained from shooting displeased glances towards Susan, who was included on the Hidden Room meeting for once.

"It does not do to lose nerve at a critical juncture," Blaise said brightly. "Hold on, Harry. We'll have you a beautiful burial yet."

"I've always known it was coming," Harry said, putting a hand on Susan's arm.

He'd never seen her glare at anyone, but the look she was shooting at Blaise could rival Hermione's darkest glower.

"You've always known that you will die tragically young and have a lovely burial?" Luna asked, raising her pale eyebrows.

"I've always known they won't wait indefinitely," Harry clarified. "I've been preparing. It's not quite as bad as it appears."

"Yes, it is," Hermione said. "You're not safe in Slytherin. Half of them will try to kill you in your sleep."

"They will fail," Harry said. "I've had five years to ward my bed."

"What safety measures are you going to take?" Terry asked. "Because this is not a joke. They might actually try to kill you."

"I haven't exactly been wasting time," Harry said. "Voldemort's supporters are many, but there's a lot of duelling club members, too. We've had some disagreements recently – " with people questioning Harry's loyalty, funny how they tended to do that. " – but I should think that people will be reassured once they see junior Death Eaters declaring war against me."

"And then?" Padma prodded.

"If it comes to open confrontations, I'll have a significant proportion of the school on my side," Harry said. "If they try to make my life difficult and sabotage me in class, once again, I have enough people to help. If they try to kill me in secret, with surreptitious attempts on my life – " Harry sighed. " – that's going to suck."

"We'll watch out for poison," Millicent said. "That's one of the most obvious ones."

Neville, who'd been sitting there pale and quiet, finally spoke up:

"Just... whatever you do, please be careful? And tell us how we can help. I want to help, in any way I can."



Harry nodded at him gratefully. Perhaps, this latest turn of events would distract Neville from his vendetta against the Lestranges, on which he still seemed disturbingly intent.

"Thanks. I'm sure I'll need your help," Harry said. "We're in for an interesting month."

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The first altercation happened right after dinner on Valentine's Day. The junior Death Eater contingent had been eerily calm during the meal, evidently reserving their ire for when they'd have the freedom to express it. The retreat to the Common Rooms gave those of them in Slytherin just such an opportunity.

"You've picked your side, then," Edward Montague said, and Harry experienced a strong sense of déjà vu.

Because this – or something like this – had happened before. He'd already been here, in this very spot, and had the angry faces of the crowd directed at him, and prepared himself to weather their wrath.

Except now it was different. He knew who his friends and enemies were. And the circle around him was not nearly as tight as it had been last June. And the feeling of all against one was decidedly lacking, because Harry had considerable numbers to support him these days, even if very few of his allies came from among upperclassmen.

"For the life of me, I can't figure out why you'd choose to stick together with Mudbloods and Dumbledore," Montague continued, mouth twisting. "But it's your funeral."

Oddly, Harry caught a hint of genuine hurt in Montague's tone. It was as if he really wanted to know why Harry had chosen the way he had.

As if he viewed Harry's choice as a desertion, rather than a given.

"The Dark Lord wants to kill me," Harry said. "He's already tried to kill me twice, and I believe there will be a third time. The truce he is offering is temporary at best, and he will not hesitate to attack me

again when he decides to. You understand that I can't choose his side, considering."

"How long have you thought that?" Miles Bletchley inquired. "Have you said any truth to us in the last few months?"

"Potter was never going to join," Malfoy declared, looking smug. "You didn't believe me before, but now you see I was right."

"Are you claiming to be smarter than the Dark Lord, Malfoy?" Nott asked sharply.

Aww. Harry was going to miss the junior Death Eater power games.

And it was going to be weird not to be included on that anymore. To still know the inside jokes, but not be allowed in on the banter. To become, once again, the pariah on his Quidditch team and generally among the circle of people he got along with reasonably well.

He wondered whether it would be strange for them, too.

"You've made a mistake," Montague told him. "You've chosen wrong. You won't last among Dumbledore's lackeys."

"But it's too late now," Bletchley said. "The Dark Lord won't forgive." He gave Harry a cold smile. "And we won't, either."

"Our Lord will show you no mercy when you meet him again," Montague concluded, and Harry would have taken that for a pro forma threat if not for the sudden exchange of glances, and grins smothered at Montague's declaration.

Harry grew instantly wary. Montague seemed to be referring to something already planned, and it could very well be the trip Harry was allegedly taking to the Ministry. Could certain persons at Hogwarts be aware of it already?

Harry was suddenly more anxious than ever to make sure that he would not end up going.

Of course, he would have other problems to occupy his time in the meanwhile. At first, Harry had wondered how the hostile members of his House would express their feelings, considering the rule of Slytherin public unity. Turned out, plausible deniability was key. Surviving on the daily basis had turned into an exciting challenge – with lovely things like Quidditch practices among people intent on causing Harry harm. And his potions being sabotaged regularly, as if dealing with a moody Neville and an even moodier Snape in that class hadn't been enough. And increased attempts to make Harry slip up and incur Umbridge's overt displeasure.

"We must stand united in this trying hour," Ernie Macmillan had said, puffing out his chest. "You can count on us, Harry."

Harry counted. Not all duelling club participants were convinced that Harry was an innocent victim in the recent upsurge of attacks, but most helped by providing the manpower for a human buffer between Harry and his assailants. At all times when Harry was out in public, there was usually a witness nearby that wasn't openly connected to Harry, and would therefore be trusted to be impartial by the teachers. After several instances of being punished for their attacks on Harry due to those witness accounts, Harry's ill-wishers had learnt to tread carefully.

Harry was gladder than ever that he'd made nearly everyone sign the Secrecy Scroll, because now even those who didn't believe him couldn't betray him.

"It's a good thing that most teachers like you," Susan said. "Must be the famed Potter charm."

"Worked on you, it seems," Harry murmured, twirling a lock of her hair around his finger. "Personally, I hope it'll continue working – "

"I'm still here, aren't I?" Susan nudged him, smiling.

In all honesty, though, Susan wasn't taking the recent events very well. She put up a brave front, but she hadn't been at ease ever since Harry had told her about the Portkey. They'd even had a bit of a fight about Valentine's Day, because Susan had insisted on staying inside

the castle and cancelling the trip to Hogsmeade, obviously worried about Harry's safety.

("Oh, we're still going to celebrate, but I have a new plan – it's going to be more personal. I don't need to leave the castle to be with my boyfriend, do I?")

Susan had had the wisdom to dress her request as a whim that Harry was indulging – to celebrate Valentine's differently from other couples. She had organised a beautiful date in the Hidden Room, procured food from the house-elves and looked so hopeful that Harry should like her arrangements that Harry couldn't do anything but capitulate.

("Of course I like it. You're right, it's much better than Hogsmeade.")

He couldn't fault her for worrying about him without coming off as a jerk, or criticise her for being too nice when she gave up her dream Hogsmeade date for his sake. She probably wouldn't have enjoyed Hogsmeade, anyway, if she were fearing for their lives every second of the trip, which was going to be a problem; Harry's life was never going to be entirely free of danger while Voldemort was around.

Harry had developed a certain degree of fatalism, because otherwise he would lose his mind thinking of ways he could be harmed, not to mention trying to plan for all possible contingencies. He was concerned that Susan was trying to do just that; that their relationship was lately bringing her stress and happiness in equal measure.

That wasn't what he wanted for her.

"I wish Auntie Amelia could do something," Susan said, frowning. "I'm sure she secretly believes that You-Know-Who is back, but she can't say so, or she'll lose her position, and that'll be even worse."

"While your aunt's support would be great, we seem to be doing fine anyway," Harry said and kissed Susan, hoping to sidetrack her. "Let's talk about something else, hmm? Like, have I mentioned that I really like your new perfume?"

Susan's face turned a fetching shade of pink.

"Today – not yet, no," she answered primly. "However, you may begin singing praises to me now."

Harry laughed and leaned in to kiss her again.

There was no use in worrying. The true test would come on the fifteenth of March, when Voldemort's supporters at Hogwarts would expect Harry to go to the Ministry and withdraw the prophecy. On that day, Harry would have to evade their close scrutiny and avoid going, which he was not expecting to be easy. Thankfully, he and the twins had long ago worked out what Operation Distraction would entail, and it promised to be rather spectacular.

Harry sincerely hoped that it would also be successful.

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By the time fifteenth of March arrived, Harry felt like he'd lived another month of the Triwizard Tournament. There was a task he'd been counting down towards, and he'd done his best to prepare for it, but ultimately it was as if he was swimming through a murky lake while at the same time trying to outwit a few dragons, and Voldemort would be waiting at the end of this maze if he failed.

"Everything is going to be fine," Hermione said.

Harry wished her voice didn't quaver.

"Yes, it is," he agreed, and marched off to his classes with a cheerful sense of doom.

He'd been constantly surrounded by students since yesterday morning – clearly, Voldemort wasn't taking any chances. Malfoy did not seem to enjoy the role of Harry's faithful shadow, but he'd nonetheless managed to glue himself to Harry, figuratively speaking, and no taunts or threats on Harry's part could chase him away.

Besides which, in Harry's year and in every class of his there were still Nott, Grabbe, and Goyle. Harry wasn't sure how involved

Parkinson was, but she would easily join the campaign just to express her loathing for Harry.

He had such caring housemates.

When the time came for the last lesson of the day – Herbology – Harry's nerves were tingling with anticipation. Tonks was, presumably, already in the castle, or would be soon. The faster he got out of the lesson and somehow dodged Malfoy and company, the safer he would be.

Harry and Terry were putting their gloves away, preparing to dash, when the greenhouse door opened with a dramatic bang.

On the threshold stood a thoroughly demented-looking Professor Umbridge.

"Potter!" she snarled, searching for Harry's face among the students and pointing her wand at all in turn. "I know it was you! It is always you!"

Harry cast a non-verbal Shield Charm just in case.

"Really, Dolores," Professor Sprout interjected, sounding scandalised, "I'm sure there is no need to threaten the students – "

"Quiet!" Umbridge demanded, brandishing her wand. "You all, be quiet! Enough!"

She swayed on her feet and leaned heavily against the door.

"I see colours," she said suddenly, in a terrified whisper. "They are coming to get me. You are all coming to get me!"

"Dolores – " Professor Sprout looked truly alarmed.

She made a step towards Umbridge.

"NO!" Umbridge screeched, shielding herself with her hands. "No, don't come near me, don't let them get me, don't – "

"Dolores, dear – "

"I SAID NO!" Umbridge shouted, and there was an ear-splitting explosion.

Several girls screamed and students dove for cover as bits of plants and soil flew at them from the plant beds next to the door. When the dust cleared, Harry saw Professor Spout lying on the ground motionless, and Umbridge cowering, crouching, by the entrance.

An odd shimmering aura surrounded her.

Students were watching her in stunned disbelief. Nobody knew what was going on, and nobody knew what they needed to do.

Harry knew what was happening, and he exchanged glances with his friends because they knew, too, but knowing didn't help them, because they hadn't expected this, either.

Operation Distraction hadn't been meant to start this way.

Back in February, the twins came up with both the idea and the execution, and Harry had helped them with perpetrating the deed. He'd thought of involving Astoria Greengrass and had given the Marauder's Map to the twins, but the Gryffindor Quidditch Team was to provide the twins' alibis and Astoria was to pull off most of the acting. The plan had been simple. Astoria would go into Umbridge's office, playing the naïve little Ministry supporter and relaying her suspicions that Harry Potter was hatching up wicked schemes. Being the daughter of a conservative Pureblood in no way associated with Dumbledore, she would likely be believed.

In the middle of her visit, however, a huge ruckus would be heard right outside the office – namely, the nearby suit of armour sailing into Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, crashing there and eliciting a wail from the ghost. Umbridge, the control freak that she was, would go sort out the disturbance, leaving Astoria alone in her office for a few minutes. And that's when Astoria would change the mints in the bowl on

Umbridge's desk for something much more interesting, and later a reverse exchange would occur to cover up the traces.

("We've developed these sweets especially for Umbridge... Between you and us, Harry, we're going to call them the Mindfuck Mints.")

Fred and George had explained about combining scurvy-grass with an Aztec fungus called Teonanácatl, which for the ease of pronunciation they'd termed the magic mushroom. Apparently, it had serious psychedelic effects. The Aztecs had used it for achieving all kinds of higher planes and trance-like states, but the twins had simply wanted to weird the living lights out of Umbridge. Harry and the twins figured that timing this prank together with Harry's supposed departure to the Ministry would be fortuitous for all, because it would distract Umbridge from spying on Harry, and divert student attention, making it easier for Harry to slip away in the ruckus and change places with Tonks.

Clearly, the plan had worked – to an extent.

Umbridge had to be under the effect of the Mindfuck Mints to act the way she was right now. However, her cornering Harry in the greenhouse was never in the original plan, and Harry was rapidly coming to realise that they should have made a provision for taking away Umbridge's wand. They hadn't counted what effects the magic mushrooms would have when combined with actual magic Umbridge was capable of, and this shimmering shield around Umbridge? It boded nothing good.

Not to mention the poor Professor Sprout.

"We should check on her," Harry murmured, pointing at the prone woman.

Padma nodded.

Harry made a cautious step towards Professor Sprout, keeping an eye on Umbridge. Professor Sprout had collapsed only a few paces away from her, so Harry would need to get reasonably close in order to check on the Hufflepuff Head of House.



Turning around briefly, Harry saw that all students were observing his movements with rapt interest, even Malfoy and his clique. The unfolding events had taken them, like everyone else, completely by surprise, and they were right to be wary of surprises today.

Harry made another step. Almost there. Trying to make no sudden movements that might set Umbridge off again, he reached for Professor Sprout, but then the luminescent aura around Umbridge wavered dangerously, folding in on itself, and darkened in colour.

Harry jumped back just in time before the shield lashed out, sizzling towards the spot where Harry had been.

Crabbe and Goyle guffawed, and the sound seemed to rouse Umbridge. She lifted her head, eyes narrowed in malice.

"I know you're here, Potter. I see you, among my enemies, and dear Cornelius – " She waved her hand at Professor Sprout. "See what you did, Potter? You – I've worked so hard, all my life, and you want to destroy everything. But I won't let you destroy me!" Then, she flinched violently. "I hear them," she said, eyes wide. "Cornelius! Cornelius, you must protect me!"

Suddenly, she burst into tears.

Terry looked nauseous, and Padma awfully pale.

After all, they had done this, or someone they knew very well had. And none of them liked Umbridge in the slightest, but to reduce a woman who prided herself on control to this snivelling wreck –

Well, even Harry's nerves were somewhat rattled by this display, although he had bigger problems on his mind right now.

Time was ticking away fast, and he was still locked in the greenhouse.

"Okay," he said. "We need to get out of here. I'm about to experiment a bit, so be ready – "

He sent a Tickling Charm at Umbridge.

The moment the spell collided with Umbridge's shield, there was another explosion – this time, minor. Then, Umbridge let out a furious yell, turned towards Harry's group and hurled a non-verbal fireball in their direction.

Lisa Turpin screamed.

The fireball hit Harry's shield, which shook at the impact; for a moment, Harry thought it would give, but then the fireball fizzled out of existence.

Then, there was silence.

"Shit," said Terry.

While they had been recovering, Umbridge became quite certain that a potted plant was her mother, and started rambling off a litany of her numerous faults. There was something about filthy half-breeds in the midst of that, but Harry wasn't paying attention.

"What if we all attack at once?" he proposed.

"We can't attack a teacher," Malfoy said sanctimoniously. "That is against school rules."

Throwing a glance at him, Harry saw that Malfoy was enjoying the situation. After all, the pro-Voldemort party had put so much effort into dogging Harry's every step today; it would be ideal for them if they could keep Harry confined to this room until Ministry officials came to collect him.

"Umbridge is not herself," Padma retorted. "We can't stay here indefinitely until someone finds us. It's not before dinner that people will realise we're all missing."

At hearing her name, Umbridge stirred again.

"Mudbloods and filth, polluting me, polluting all of us – "

"Professor Sprout needs urgent medical help," Harry said loudly. "We need to get out of here and take her to the Infirmary."

"I have always done what is necessary!" Umbridge said, raising her voice to match Harry's. "I have never shirked my responsibilities! I have always served my country!"

"Professor Umbridge needs help too," Anthony said. "Clearly."

"And Potter will pay for all he's done!" Umbridge screamed. "And Dumbledore! And you, you, how dare you call yourself my mother – "

She aimed her wand at the potted plant and a jet of fire burst out of her wand, engulfing the plant in flames.

Umbridge cackled.

The plant exploded.

"Not so long till dinner, now," Nott said pointedly. "It will be safer to wait a little instead of risking ours and Professor Umbridge's health."

"I'm not sure it's good for our health to be locked here with her," Harry countered. "Umbridge can't be strong enough to repel us all, can she?"

"We should try," Padma said, and took aim.

On the count of three, Harry, his friends and most of the duelling club members present cast simultaneous Stunners at Umbridge. Then, the whole class dove to all sides when a violent explosion rippled through the greenhouse.

"What on earth is it with her?" Morag McDougal asked, peeking at Umbridge from behind the table, now overturned.

"Uncontrolled accidental magic," Anthony said, and there was despair in his voice. "Whatever is wrong with Umbridge, her magic has gone

completely haywire, and have you noticed that her shield seems to get stronger after our spells? How the hell is she doing it?"

"Uncontrolled magic," Terry reminded him. "You've just said."

Fuck uncontrolled magic. There was less than half an hour until dinner. Just when was Harry supposed to change places with Tonks?

The prank was meant to debilitate Umbridge and distract the students. It was not meant to lock Harry in with a class full of observers, hurt Professor Sprout and possibly sabotage the Order's entire plan!

"What about the windows?" he asked, addressing his friends. "Can we – "

"Spell-resistant," Anthony said, quashing Harry's hope in the bud.

"Are you sure?" Blaise pressed.

"Yes," Anthony said, annoyed. "But you're welcome to try."

Wasting no time, Millicent turned around and sent a Bludgeoning Curse at the greenhouse window. The curse reflected off the window at an angle and went speeding towards Theodore Nott.

Indifferently, Harry watched him dodge, and then turned back towards his friends.

Anthony looked to be deep in thought, Terry confused, Padma worried, Millicent brooding and Blaise darkly amused.

"What a hoot," Blaise whispered to Harry. "Dumbledore's scheming, Operation Distraction, mighty plans. All goes down the drain because Umbridge found herself a greenhouse."

Unless, of course, someone had noticed her state and directed her to the greenhouse on purpose.

Harry cursed under his breath, thinking furiously. He had no way to send a message – he considered the fake Galleons Hermione'd

created, but they only allowed him to set a date and time for the dulling club meetings. Umbridge was blocking the only exit, and the Mindfuck Mints somehow set her magic wild. Ideally, Harry also needed to escape without making himself appear suspicious.

Then again, perhaps not everything was lost. Ministry officials were supposed to appear later; while it would be a close call, Harry would still have time after dinner to switch places with Tonks.

Accomplishing that was more likely than escaping right now, anyway.

By the time footsteps were heard outside the greenhouse, Umbridge had destroyed several more plants, hallucinated up the appearance of Cornelius Fudge once again, and launched another attack at Harry.

Harry was just trying to catch his breath when the greenhouse door opened to reveal Professor Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall and Lucius Malfoy standing on the other side.

"Father!" Draco exclaimed in surprise, while Harry repressed the urge to let out a creative combination of curses.

"Good evening, Draco," Lucius Malfoy drawled.

He raised an eyebrow at the wreckage in the room as Dumbledore and McGonagall laboured to restrain Umbridge.

"Mr. Potter," Malfoy added, once his gaze found Harry. His lips curled in a small smile. "It will be my pleasure to escort you to the Ministry of Magic after dinner tonight."

Following his classmates out the door under Lucius Malfoy's watchful eye, Harry was sure that somewhere, someone was laughing.

Disclaimer: Harry Potter does not belong to me.

A/N: Sincere thanks to Mordac, who'd taken time out of his busy schedule to look over a large part of the chapter. Also a great thank-you to Voice of the Nephilim, who'd been of immense help. As usual, my amazing beta Gwendolyn was amazing and I am very grateful to her for it. Oh, and let me issue a warning for some potentially disturbing imagery in this chapter, just in case.

Harry hardly saw where he was walking, his mind abuzz with schemes and questions. He felt, without being capable of articulating it right this moment, that a lot of things – too many things – weren't adding up. Lucius Malfoy's presence was odd, as was the whole situation with Umbridge, but he didn't have the time to think any of it through. Every step he took brought him closer to danger, so he needed to focus on what was important right now.

Getting himself the fuck out of this fix was important.

He'd already tried walking off on different excuses, but someone had always volunteered to walk till the ends of the earth with him. However, he was reaching the boiling point about now. If anyone accompanied him, he'd just Stun them, Oblivate them, Imperius them – whatever, he didn't care.

He'd already opened his mouth to proclaim his intention to return to the dormitories when Madam Hooch appeared from around the next corner.

"Headmaster!" she said, looking relieved to see Dumbledore. "There are two gentlemen looking for you – "

Two wizards in official Ministry robes were following her. One of the men was dressed in bright scarlet and had a stocky build; the other wore midnight blue robes and was somehow long and sour-looking.

"Auror Dawlish, Mr. Croaker," Dumbledore said, inclining his head.

An interested murmur swept through Harry's classmates, while he gritted his teeth. It seemed that his intentions would be thwarted at every turn today.

"Evening, Dumbledore," said the man addressed as Croaker. "Never meant to barge in like this. Dinner ought to be over, we'd have thought."

"Not to worry," Dumbledore said. "We've had some unforeseen circumstances interrupting our schedule."

"Very well," the Auror – Dawlish – started, but then Lucius Malfoy stepped forward.

"Good evening, Dawlish," he said with a smile.

"Mr. Malfoy!" the Auror exclaimed, eyes widening. "Blimey, sir, good evening!"

"This is a fortunate meeting indeed," Lucius stated. "Draco tells me that Mr. Potter is going to the Ministry today, and I find myself interested in accompanying him. Perhaps I shall go along with you all."

"That's out of order," Croaker declared. "This is official Ministry business. No unauthorised additions allowed."

Judging by Lucius Malfoy's face, he didn't appreciate being called an unauthorised addition.

"Oh, I think that, if you asked the Minister, you would find that he would authorise my presence immediately," Lucius drawled. "What do you think, Dawlish?"

The Auror looked uncertainly between Croaker and Malfoy.

"I'm certain you wouldn't suggest anything that the Minister wouldn't approve of, Mr. Malfoy, sir," he mumbled.

"Indeed." Malfoy inclined his head slightly. "I would not compromise the Minister's trust, I assure you."

"Naturally, naturally," Dumbledore said. "Now, you gentlemen have arrived somewhat early, so I'm quite convinced we would all benefit from some fortification with tea – or perhaps you might consent to stay for dinner?"

"Really, Dumbledore, we should get cracking," Dawlish said. "There's some security arrangements to conduct before we leave, so we'd better start. Could we find a more private area?" he asked, eyeing the congregated students in barely concealed distaste.

Harry glanced at Dumbledore. If there were security checks to be passed, Harry would need to get that done before switching with Tonks, which was fine, but – another delay, and he wasn't sure how many more he could withstand.

"Of course," Dumbledore said. "This way, please."

Anthony and Terry looked worried, Padma was biting her lip, Millicent was frowning, and Blaise just muttered a quiet be careful before Harry set off after the adults. Harry would dearly like to turn back around and curse Malfoy, Nott and Parkinson to all seven hells for smirking in an impossibly superior way, but he had bigger things to worry about.

Like, exactly what this Ministry security would entail. Casting his mind back to Dumbledore's explanations in January, Harry could only recall that identification tests had been mentioned. In fact, the Order had been nervous that Tonks would fail to pass them at the Ministry.

Dumbledore gave Harry an encouraging smile.

Harry was not encouraged.

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After a short walk, they ended up in a small chamber just off the entrance hall.



Croaker immediately withdrew a small pouch from his pocket. He then, incongruously, produced out of it a bunch of scrolls and a mirror about three times the pouch's size.

"Simple procedure," Croaker declared. "Would every one of you, in turn, look into this mirror? Yes, Mr. Malfoy, you as well, if you intend to accompany us."

"What is special about the mirror?" Harry had to ask.

"It is a Monitoring Mirror," Croaker said. "Reveals every deception and disguise. Mr. Malfoy?"

With an air of someone from whom a great sacrifice was being unfairly required, Malfoy walked over and glanced into the mirror. One of the scrolls sprung to life at once, and Malfoy's name appeared on it in neat cursive.

Croaker nodded approvingly.

"You next, Mr. Potter."

Nothing special transpired when Harry looked at his reflection – except for another scroll unfurling and giving up his full name. Harry wondered what the mirror would have done if Tonks had been here in his stead.

Dawlish had apparently been tested before, because the Monitoring Mirror was put away as soon as Dumbledore was done, and then Croaker demanded that they all sign the parchment with their names on it. As it turned out, this was to signify that they were aware they could not disclose anything seen at the Department of Mysteries. All in all, as far as security arrangements went, Harry felt it could have been a lot worse.

"Very well," Croaker said. "We may leave immediately."

"Oh, but," Harry began, and then didn't know how to continue. "What – right now?"

He threw a frantic glance at Dumbledore, only to find that he was watching Lucius Malfoy, who was watching Harry.

"You requested to go in the first place, didn't you, Mr. Potter?" Dawlish said, and now he looked at the time.

"Yes, but – I'm not feeling so well," Harry said, suddenly seeing what he'd been missing all this time. Too bad he didn't have any Nosebleed Nougat or Puking Pastilles on him. "I think one of Professor Umbridge's spells hit me – oh, you haven't heard, she went a bit strange – anyway. I really don't think I can go right now, so if I could just go lie down for a while – "

Croaker surveyed him in displeasure.

"Mr. Potter, our Portkey leaves in fifteen minutes. Portkey wards over the Department of Mysteries have been lifted especially on your account for a thirty-second window. If you are feeling unwell, you may cancel today's appointment and arrange a time for another day, but you must decide now."

Oh, well, if he must.

"I am feeling rather unwell," Harry began, but then Dumbledore interrupted him by addressing the officials:

"Would you excuse Mr. Potter and myself for one moment?"

Croaker's expression darkened.

"Kindly bear in mind that our Portkey is leaving soon."

Harry allowed Dumbledore to lead him a slight bit away, frowning all the while. From the dampening of noise around them, Harry discerned that the man had put up a nonverbal sound ward.

"Harry," Dumbledore said. "The progress that we could achieve tonight matters more than you perhaps realise. Things have not been going well for us, I fear. Not well at all. Voldemort has been recruiting

allies since June, and he has been more successful than we; if we do not check his progress, the war will be lost because he has been ignored for too long."

Harry was used to motivational speeches. He'd given a fair share himself, so he felt he could withstand Dumbledore's sorrowful gaze without cracking.

"The Ministry, or at the very least the Minister, will not acknowledge Voldemort's return without irrefutable proof," Dumbledore continued, sparing a look to the officials. "While it is beyond doubt that Voldemort will eventually produce it, it would be disastrous to let him announce his return on his own terms, because he will not do so until he is ready and assured of victory. By then, it will be much too late."

"I understand that," Harry said. "But why are you so sure that I have to go? Voldemort knows we'll be there tonight. He's probably lying in wait already. You could just go, without me, and find him there – "

"That cannot be," Dumbledore refuted calmly. "Surely you realise the purpose behind Lucius Malfoy's presence."

"Making sure I don't get lost on the way to the Ministry?"

Dumbledore shook his head.

"You are correct, but not entirely. Voldemort has no plans to expose himself unless he has proof that Harry Potter will in fact appear tonight to withdraw the prophecy. Lucius Malfoy will give him the signal when we are leaving to the Ministry, or perhaps when we are already there. It could even be that Voldemort plans to use the same thirty-second window of opportunity that our Mr. Croaker was so explicit about."

Harry rather thought he'd have figured out the reason behind Malfoy's presence had he not been so preoccupied with all the other stuff that kept happening.

"We have always known Voldemort would exercise some sort of observation," Dumbledore added. "We considered perhaps a lookout

at the Ministry, to notify him of our arrival, but he has chosen differently."

"Fine," Harry conceded. "I can see that. I still don't see why we can't postpone this meeting. Didn't we originally decide that the plan wouldn't go through if Tonks couldn't replace me? Especially if we can just arrange things for another day, like Croaker said."

"We are reasonably sure of Voldemort's actions tonight," Dumbledore replied. "We know, more or less, how things will proceed. If we miss this chance, we shall be flung again into the realm of unpredictability, and there is no saying that we will be able to plan in advance again."

"But – " Harry lowered his voice, even despite the wards. "Snape – "

"He has received no information regarding tonight's events," Dumbledore said. "It is reasonable to suppose that Voldemort does not yet trust him to any significant degree. Severus is doing his best, but his possibilities are limited."

Harry held in a scowl by sheer effort of will.

"Yes, but it doesn't mean that I have to go. With all due respect, sir, I don't see why I should get involved in something that has nothing to do with me!"

He knew, already as he said it, that the words rang false and wrong and petulant. And he'd almost anticipated Dumbledore's thoughtful –

"Nothing to do with you? I thought that you had been the one insisting that this war has everything to do with you."

Because he had. He had been the one insisting, for so long, that he wanted to fight, that he wanted to be included on the information to do with this war because he was entitled to it by virtue of his own involvement. And yet, when things came to a head, he didn't want to get involved?

Harry glared at the stone floor under his feet.

He'd been so content in letting the Order handle this plan without him that he hadn't really stopped to think what the plan meant for his position in the war. And really? It sounded like he should have given it some prior thought, beyond the immediate need to assure his own safety.

He knew that he'd have to fight Voldemort, which meant that he had a vested interest in checking Voldemort's progress if, and while, he could. If giving up on the plan would really create such a huge setback, on the grand scheme of things – wouldn't it make sense, strategic, political sense for him to go?

Or then not. Or then it could be completely idiotic to go, spelling-his-own-doom level of stupid, because what sane person went into a dangerous situation knowing they were in no way prepared?

"I might have been the one saying I wanted to get involved," Harry said, "but you were the one saying I was too young, sir. What happened to that?"

Dumbledore seemed to age several decades before Harry's eyes.

"This unfortunate collision of circumstances perturbs me more than words can describe, and I assure you that I will do everything in my power to keep you safe should you agree to help us in this mission. Please believe me that I regret asking so much from you."

"But you ask anyway," Harry muttered.

Regret or not, the result was the same, and Harry wasn't sure what he felt about that, except the frustration that he felt towards everything right at that moment.

By going, Harry would put himself in danger. This was an irrefutable fact. Harry's self-preservation instinct, honed to perfection, was screaming at him to back out of this and run as fast as he could.

However – and this was a creeping, unpleasant realisation that reverberated through Harry's mind in ways that reshuffled plans and hopes and ideas of self –

He wasn't going to get through the war and reach his goal without taking some risks.

Harry had thought he was aware of it, but the shock he felt at the idea of actually risking himself told him he'd been wrong. Very glaringly stupidly wrong. He'd thought he could prepare and reach the point when he'd be ready. He'd started taking time and freedom to prepare for granted. He'd begun believing that he'd be able to choose his own battles.

This was laughable, in retrospect. Voldemort had never given an indication that he'd wait for Harry to get ready. There was no reason to expect that Harry would even live through his next birthday, never mind long enough to get ready. Sometime, he needed to stop letting things happen and start acting, instead, even if ready remained a far-off concept.

Was this the time to start? Fuck only knew. However, a very important plan would fail if Harry didn't go to the Ministry, and that meant – that meant the first real test of what Harry was willing to do for his cause, as opposed to just plan on doing.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw movement and turned around to observe Dawlish stalking purposefully towards him and Dumbledore.

"Please, Headmaster, we are on a tight schedule!" Dawlish exclaimed. "Our Portkey is leaving in eight minutes. If Mr. Potter feels ill enough to cancel the appointment, he must say so. If he wishes to go, we must leave at once."

There was a pause.

"Harry?" Dumbledore prompted.

More than anything, Harry wanted time – time to evaluate everything, time to choose the right way to act, time to take a deep breath. Time that he did not have.

"Can you swear to me that this is as important as you're making it out to be?" he asked Dumbledore, in one last-ditch attempt to determine something, fully aware that it wasn't going to help him at all.

"Yes, and I can swear I shall endeavour to keep you safe," Dumbledore said solemnly. "I shall create you an outward Portkey and call Fawkes – "

Dawlish was going a little purple in the face from seeing, but not hearing, them interact. Dumbledore lifted the sound wards.

"Then I'd like that Portkey, yes," Harry said – to Dawlish, but he was looking at Dumbledore.

He wasn't even half-sure that he'd made the right decision, and he kept deliberating all through being rushed along corridors towards Hogwarts grounds and then out of the gates. Maybe he should have said no, but maybe he should have said yes long ago, and maybe he should have done so many other things differently, and maybe he'd never get the chance now –

Head spinning with the possibilities that he should have risked or had not taken or was marching off towards, Harry laid his hand on the Portkey that would deposit him and the adults at the Department of Mysteries.

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The Portkey landed Harry and his companions in a black corridor in front of an equally black door, and there were two seconds of perfect silence.

Then, an elevator gave a ping in the distance.

"Right this way," Croaker said, gesturing towards the door. "Follow me."

Harry wasn't sure when he'd taken his wand out, but he became aware of gripping it in his hand.

The door Croaker opened before them led to a circular room, the main feature of which were another eleven identically black doors and branches of candles burning with blue light. Together with the black floor and black ceiling and black everything, this created a surreal environment, which might have been the point.

A glance at Malfoy revealed that he, too, was tense, and he kept looking back at Dumbledore, who completed their procession. Dawlish and Croaker seemed to be the only ones not aware that they were walking – literally – into a trap. Maybe not behind the next door, and maybe not behind the next one still, but somewhere in this silent department were Death Eaters waiting for them to arrive – or, if they weren't yet, they'd soon be coming from behind.

Croaker pressed his hand against one door and murmured something under his breath. The doors started spinning rapidly with a soft whooshing noise, Croaker's hand still pressed firmly to what was alternatively a wall or a door.

Dumbledore chose that moment to appear by Harry's side.

"Here," he said quietly, pressing a small object into Harry's hand. "Your – "

Portkey might have been the next word, but then suddenly several things happened in very close succession.

The doors stopped spinning, and an odd constricting sensation came over Harry. Next, Croaker opened the door in front of him, and –

"Avada Kedavra!"

Spells flashed from beyond the door, and Harry couldn't count how many black robes and white masks there were – most of the Death Eaters remained behind cover, but a couple charged ahead.

Shrieks ringing in his ears, Harry dashed instinctively to the side and threw up a shield.



None of the spells were aimed at him. Instead, the Death Eaters let out a volley of Killing Curses at Dumbledore. Harry tried to shout out a warning even though Dumbledore must have seen them.

Then, a curse impacted his shield.

Harry turned to see that Lucius Malfoy, unlike unknown Death Eaters behind that door, wasn't aiming at Dumbledore. He was pointing his wand straight at Harry – and so was, suddenly, inexplicably, Auror Dawlish.

Vexo, Harry thought, thrusting his wand at Dawlish, and dodged another curse by Mafoy.

Not an Unforgivable, notably, but – should Harry cast any, at the Ministry?

Ango, he added mentally, twisting his wand. Mulco. Kaio –

As Lucius batted Harry's curse aside, Harry quickly reached out for the door beside him and pushed it open.

They were at a distinct disadvantage here, he and Dumbledore, in this small rounded space between all the doors – they had no cover, and they were easily surrounded –

Where was the Order?

Harry ran into the room before he'd managed to develop that thought, and was beginning to wonder about Dumbledore when the old man appeared next to him in a flash of flames and a trill of phoenix song.

"This will give us but a moment," Dumbledore said, transfiguring the door into a solid block of granite, "but we need that moment dearly."

Harry focused on him, without even looking properly around the room – he just noticed that it was spacious and rectangular, with desks standing in rows, various artefacts upon them.

"The Portkey, sir," Harry said urgently. "How do I activate the Portkey that you gave me?"

He tried to concentrate on that matter and ignore the shouts from the other side of the door.

"You do not," Dumbledore said and didn't blink at Harry's incredulous look. "Getting here has taken too long and the Portkey wards have come back into force again, although you might not have felt it."

"Then – " Harry shook his head. "How do I get out?"

"The Atrium," Dumbledore said. "The Portkey will leave from the Atrium. However – Fawkes?" Dumbledore turned his head to look at the gold and crimson bird perched on his shoulder. "Would you escort Harry back into Hogwarts?"

Harry recalled the time back in this second year, when Fawkes had rescued him from the Chamber of Secrets, and felt his spirits rise. Surely, Fawkes will be able to help him.

However, the bird gave a trill and did not move.

Dumbledore frowned, looking at it.

"This is very important," he implored, raising his voice over the sound of spells exploding against the door. "Harry Potter requires your help."

Another stubborn trill, and Harry couldn't believe what he was seeing. The bloody bird was refusing!

"Why?" he asked involuntarily.

Dumbledore transferred his cloudy gaze onto him, now.

"You are no longer innocent," the Headmaster said, and every word sounded heavy, as if it came with effort. "You have touched magics that have rendered you unclean. I cannot fault you for lack of loyalty to me, but Harry – what have you done?"

Harry's mind was blank. What had he done? Nothing that he could think of – he'd dabbled in questionable magic, yes, but so did everyone in Slytherin, and what was he supposed to learn from Montague and Bletchley and Pucey if not that and –

Could that really taint him so badly?

No. No, those things didn't matter. And if the bloody phoenix counted that Unforgivable Harry'd cast against Voldemort back in the day, fuck that.

"I haven't done anything – " Harry began, but now was never going to be the time, because then the door finally gave under the sheer brute force of the spells levelled at it.

The sounds of violent fight burst into the room, and Harry saw that Death Eaters weren't the only people waiting on the other side of the door. There was Lupin, and Shacklebolt, and Moody – and Black, whose shoulder gave a sickening crack as it collided with the doorframe. He gave a snarl and retaliated with a curse at his opponent, and that opponent gave a loud, deranged laugh, and her hood fell off as she was propelled into the room by the force of Black's spell.

Bellatrix Lestrange. Well, how fucking nice.

"Crucio!" she yelled, wand pointed at Black, and Black grabbed a cloaked Death Eater and swung him into the path of her curse.

He screamed. Bellatrix laughed. Black did too.

This was complete chaos – bodies colliding with each other, curses flashing, and no place to run, with the door thus blocked. Unless there was another exit?

"Potter!" someone screamed, all triumphant recognition, and Harry was already shielding, but then Dumbledore wove his wand in a complicated arc, and the space around them cleared.

Harry eyed the Death Eaters who'd been scattered, as if by a gust of wind, and looked at Dumbledore.

"You must reach the Atrium," Dumbledore said. "Kingsley!"

Shacklebolt was nearby – his opponent just collapsed, knocked out. Harry glanced from him to Hestia Jones, who was engaged in a fierce battle.

Judging by her pallor, she was losing. Whoever she was fighting clearly knew and enjoyed what they were doing.

"Kingsley, I must go and find Voldemort," Dumbledore said, not to be distracted. "We cannot allow him to disappear in this ruckus."

Harry saw Hestia Jones fall, and the Death Eater standing above her raise his wand again.

"Os amove!" Harry fired.

The Death Eater's suddenly boneless arm flopped down, and he swore, looking around for the culprit.

"Good one, Tonks," Kingsley said.

The Death Eater's answering curse bounced off of Dumbledore's shield and reflected back, and then the other fighters concealed him from view.

"Kingsley, this is Harry, not Tonks," Dumbledore said, drawing their attention again.

Kingsley's eyes widened minutely on his usually impassive face.

"Harry must get to the Atrium as soon as possible, for then he can leave by Portkey," Dumbledore continued.

"Understood," Kingsley said.

"Very well," Dumbledore replied, and disappeared in another flash of flames, the phoenix and all.

Immediately, it was as if a security blanket had been lifted.

Harry dodged as a curse flew right by him.

"Stay close to me," Kingsley ordered, looking uneasy.

"Fine," Harry said and saw another curse impact the shield around him and Kingsley.

Strangely, nothing lethal was aimed at Harry. Why ever not? Saving him up for Voldemort? Harry didn't like that idea.

"Come on now, quickly," Kingsley said.

He started dragging Harry through the crowd.

A curse flying at them, and Harry was already saying the counter when Kingsley pushed him out of the way.

"What – "

"Not now," Kingsley muttered, and made to drag Harry out of a spell's way again, but Harry swerved out of his grasp, fired a counter –

And found himself face to face with a dark-haired Death Eater blocking their way.

"Dolohov," Kingsley said. "Incarcerous."

Dolohov waved the curse away with a devil-may-care smile.

"Explodere caputem," Harry cast in a whisper and ignored Kingsley's start.

"Harry Potter," Dolohov said. "The rumours weren't exaggerated."

What, about Harry casting head-exploding curses?

Dolohov's Cruciatus collided with an odd boulder Kingsley had summoned to put between the Death Eater and Harry, and the next with a summoned pyramid, and the next with a globe of the sky.

"I can do that myself, could you maybe attack him or something – " Harry said, incensed, but Kingsley only frowned harder.

"My job is to protect you," he bit out.

"I can protect myself!"

Harry fired a nonverbal Choking Curse to prove it, but the curse collided with the model of Stonehenge Kingsley had summoned next –

All three of them put up shields to defend from the flying debris. Harry swore. Dolohov smiled.

"These people don't think very highly of you, Harry Potter," he said, and proved his own appreciation by firing another Cruciatus in Harry's direction.

Kingsley summoned a vase to protect Harry.

Harry thought it would make more sense for him to defend himself, while Kingsley attacked Dolohov, but – fine.

Deripere viscus, Harry cast.

"Crucio!" Dolohov responded, dodging the Entrails-Expelling Curse.

Kingsley defended Harry with a summoned clock.

Lassescavi, Harry added quickly.

"Crucio!"

Another pyramid before Harry.

Commuto in membrana!

"Crucio!"

A sundial before Harry – but nothing hit it, because the Cruciatus diverted towards Kingsley at the last second.

Kingsley collapsed with a half-scream, half-gurgle. Harry threw the sundial back at Dolohov, forcing him to break concentration and lift the Unforgivable – but then Dolohov cast another quick torture curse at Harry, and, while he was dodging, pointed his wand at Kingsley.

"Chetvertovat tebjá kak na berezakh!"

Kingsley's whole body contracted. Suddenly, it was as if invisible force tore at him, pulling him by his legs and his arms in four directions. It stretched impossibly, trying to tear Kingsley's body apart, while his face contorted in horror –

Harry swallowed against bile rising in his throat.

"Stop it," he found himself saying to Dolohov. "Fuck you, just stop this – Crucio, you bastard, Avada Kedavra – "

The fear of being caught casting Unforgivables at the Ministry faded before the urgent need to make Kingsley's torture stop.

"Don't worry, little Potter." Dolohov laughed, dodging. "It won't be my pleasure to do the same to you."

Harry noticed that it was quieter now, and looked around the room to see that only Moody and Barty Crouch Jr. were still there, locked in a duel. Bloodstains stood out on the wooden floor, and the smell of mingled sweat and fear hung in the air.

Loud explosions and shouts were coming from somewhere outside of the room.

There was no one here to help, and Kingsley needed medical help, very soon.

"Avada Kedavra!" Harry cast desperately.

"You could still beg for forgiveness, you know," Dolohov said, dodging again. "He might forgive you, if say how sorry you are and how good you will be – "

Harry felt the next Cruciatus coming intuitively and lurched to the side not a moment too late.

"Oh, this is not fun at all," Dolohov said. "Let us spice things, yes?"

The wand in Dolohov's hand became the handle of a blazing whip. He swung at Harry. Harry dodged, eyes widening.

He tried to counter with water – but that only made the whip flame harder.

He backed away, further from where Kingsley lay, now unmoving. He summoned things to shield himself, and tried a cutting curse on the whip, and a blasting on Dolohov. He really couldn't aim with that flaming whip flying about before him and protecting Dolohov in a hazy ever-moving wall of flames – and the main thing weighing on his mind wasn't his own duel, but how Kingsley was doing, and he knew he needed to pull himself together and concentrate.

"Avada Kedavra," Harry whispered again, but Dolohov was already twisting, and already turning, and his spell didn't falter even for a second.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw the bright flash of a curse – and Moody, charging at him and Dolohov.

"Go to Kingsley, he's over there," Harry shouted.

"You need help!" Moody panted out.

Harry dodged another blow of the whip, fired a nonverbal Kaio at Dolohov and turned to Moody.



"Have a look at Kingsley first!"

His attention had been diverted for a fraction of a second, but Dolohov was fast –

Pain.

Pain assaulted Harry's left shoulder as the whip hit him, and Harry gritted his teeth against crying out.

"Just a taste, Potter," Dolohov promised. "Alas, that is all I can give you."

"Step aside, Tonks!" Moody ordered.

Harry felt warm blood well up from the wound, but didn't look at it, eyes still glued to Dolohov's every move.

"Look at Kingsley," Harry insisted. "He's much worse than me – Crucio," he whispered, once Moody disappeared from his peripheral vision.

"Tonks?" Dolohov repeated. "The old man thinks you are – no matter."

It was a good thing too that Moody thought Harry was Tonks; he'd never have gone and left him, injured, alone with Dolohov otherwise. Harry normally wouldn't have wanted him to, but Kingsley had looked so horrible –

Moody returned only a few dodges and curses later.

"Step aside now!" he barked, looking grim. "Get lost, I'll take it from here!"

Harry didn't argue further.

Moody had a wooden leg, but boy, he was fast – Harry felt he could finally turn his back on Dolohov and run. He wondered briefly what befell Barty Crouch, but if Moody was still standing and he was not –

There was a door.

There were, in fact, two doors from this room leading somewhere, but one of them was closer, and that decided Harry's choice.

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Running in, Harry saw combatants dispersed all over a round room which looked like a hurricane had raged through it. Tables overturned, cabinets in shambles, and potions in puddles on the floor...

Lucius Malfoy was fighting Emmeline Vance, while Lupin was engaged with some Death Eater Harry didn't recognise, and then Bill Weasley – Dedalus Diggle –

"Potter! There you are!"

Harry ducked instinctively, letting a curse sail over his head, and whirled around to see Dawlish charging at him. So much for the respite he'd been hoping for – the wound in his shoulder sent a jolt of sharp pain down his arm every time he moved, and now he'd get no time to fix it up.

He fired a quick Choking Curse at Dawlish. Dawlish shielded, and Harry was free for a whole second, so tried to disappear into the crowd again –

It was important to remember that he had to get to the Atrium –

But Dawlish's cry had attracted attention.

Another Death Eater appeared in front of Harry, wand pointed.

"Crucio," he said.

Harry ducked and hurled a chair at Dawlish.

"Imperio!" Dawlish shouted, aiming at Harry, and there was only the Killing Curse missing from the Unforgivables flying at him, and Harry was done.

He spun out of the curse's way, shot a nonverbal Reducto at the unknown Death Eater's feet, and jumped behind a huge cabinet that was standing nearby.

From there, he threw a shattering curse at the row of crystal vials next to the Death Eater, to make him dance around like this was some fucked-up ballet, and then took aim at Dawlish.

"Comprimo," Harry whispered, unsure he could use the mind curse nonverbally.

The curse would create intense psychological pressure on Dawlish that would make him completely lose the will to fight, if it worked right – but oddly, Harry encountered an obstacle as his curse assaulted the man. It was as if something wasn't letting his curse through, or something was giving resistance, something –

Harry rolled out of the way as the cabinet exploded under the force of a spell.

"Crucio!" came another cry.

Dawlish at least was clutching his head and not reacting to anything, so Harry focused on his other opponent.

Sidestep. Curse. Dodge.

He allowed one spell to hit his shield, responded with a spell to induce lung failure, then wove a fast counter-curse to a specific hugely unpleasant curse as he dove to the side, and there was a choice there – to let the Laceration Curse hit him or else jump into the Cruciatus – Laceration Curse it was, and Harry gritted his teeth as his leg tore open with a small fountain of blood.

Sidestep. Curse. Dodge.

Harry's shield was held up by a barely noticeable effort of will. All that he needed was – focus, aim, be alert, and he knew how to do this, he'd trained to do this – even if he hadn't trained for the stench of blood, or for moving through the pain, or for the sickening sound of bones breaking under the assault of his spells.

Harry unconsciously registered another presence nearby, and was already whirling to cast in that direction when he saw that it was Lupin.

"Need help?" Lupin asked. He looked battle-worn, but bright-eyed.

It took Harry a moment to process the question, but then he finally hit his opponent with a nonverbal spell to make skin paper-thin.

From then on, it was child's play – one cutting curse, and the man was on the floor.

Lupin looked torn between approval and disgust.

"It's mostly the smell, for me," he said. "I do hate the smell. It reminds me – never mind."

Harry shrugged. He didn't like it much, either. He didn't cast these spells for the fun of it, it was just – if he weren't fast enough and efficient enough, it would be him on the floor, instead.

"By the way, I'm not – " Tonks, Harry'd been planning to say, but couldn't.

Because then a huge explosion shook the room.

The entire wall opposite Harry caved in, revealing the adjacent room – and there, there was Voldemort.

Voldemort in a long black cloak, now speckled with dust all over.

Harry froze in shock at the sight of the crimson eyes and the white face that haunted his nightmares. He felt Lupin stiffen next to him, and he heard the Death Eaters cheer.

Next thing they saw, however, was Dumbledore appearing from the rubble.

Dumbledore flicked his wand. The stone surface of the floor rose up in a smooth wave and darted towards Voldemort, clearly attempting to encircle him.

A fraction of a second later, a wave of Voldemort's shattered the stone into tiny pieces with a thunderous noise. He flung them into the air and sent back at Dumbledore. Dumbledore shielded quickly, but that moment gave Voldemort the time to attack.

He fired a Killing Curse. Dumbledore stepped out of its way and shielded himself with a chair against another immediately. With a subtle wave of his wand, chains sprung from the floor around Voldemort.

Voldemort sent another Killing Curse at Dumbledore, then noticed the chains. His spell tore them from the ground at once and transformed them into spears, which he flung at Dumbledore.

Dumbledore transfigured them on the fly into writhing ropes. They flew back at Voldemort, sailing through the air with a whoosh –

Voldemort turned them into snakes and ordered them to attack – or so Harry guessed.

He was glued to his spot, watching the rapid duel unfold. So were the others. Some people still duelled, but the focus of everyone's attention was on the fight.

Dumbledore's not trying to kill him, Harry thought as he watched Dumbledore vanish the snakes and dodge another Killing Curse. Voldemort is aiming to kill, but Dumbledore's not. Why?

Harry had no answer. It was only clear to him that Dumbledore wanted to hold Voldemort up, imprison him – bars of a cage were growing around Voldemort now – or tie him down, but he was not trying to kill. Harry hoped to all that was holy that Dumbledore wasn't doing this because of the prophecy that said he had to kill Voldemort.

Watching Dumbledore and Voldemort parry each other's blows with seeming effortlessness, Harry wasn't sure he'd ever reach the point when he'd be able to duel like that. He couldn't even take out Dolohov, and it was painfully clear that both Voldemort and Dumbledore would have wiped the floor with Dolohov in a matter of seconds.

Voldemort deflected a net of stones to the side, through the hole to the next room. The resulting explosion deafened Harry for a second and reverberated in his ears, and for a moment dust covered the room and he couldn't see.

The next thing he did see – and he hardly believed his eyes – was Auror Dawlish, sneaking up behind Voldemort, looking every inch the man knowing he was not going to survive his suicidal assault and not caring anyway.

Dawlish cast something. Harry didn't hear what over the murmur of voices all around the room, but he did see very well what happened next.

Voldemort whipped around and gave a condescending sneer.

"What is this insolence?"

Dumbledore made a motion with his arm, as if to swipe Dawlish away, remove him from harm – but Voldemort was faster.

Among Dawlish's screams of injustice, Imperius and revenge, Voldemort twisted his wand just so – and Dawlish's head tore from his body and rolled on the floor, leaving a thick trail of blood.

The body collapsed, silenced. Blood flowed freely from the neck, and people scattered out of the rolling head's way, and Harry, hardly able to tear his eyes away, suddenly knew with horrifying clarity that he was going to throw up.

He'd tried casting all manner of horrible hexes tonight, many times. He'd cast a head-exploding curse at Dolohov, for fuck's sake. He

hadn't expected this, though. He hadn't been prepared for the effect if he succeeded.

Fuck.

He stumbled away, backwards, not caring whom he pushed out of his path.

Hands tried to stop him – the call of Potter, Potter is here rang through the air – but Harry cast a string of curses and ran.

The Atrium. The Atrium. He needed to get to the Atrium.

He dashed out of the room and found himself in a small alcove, instead. From there led two doors, and Harry tugged on the curtain of one only to discover that it wasn't a door at all, but rather a mirror. A mirror that he knew and had seen before. The one that showed not his face, but his heart's desire.

Harry ignored it and rushed to tug on the second door, already hearing the heavy footfalls of someone chasing after him.

On the other side, there was silence.

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Harry shut and warded the door on complete autopilot.

The room first seemed brightly lit to him, but then he realized it was actually half-dark, and then he figured the lighting was ambient, and then something changed again and Harry understood the room was just messing with his head.

It seemed both a storage and a research room, upon a second glance. There were shelves lining the entire place, with artefacts on them under protective glass and plaques explaining what they were –

Mongolian amulet of power, Deathstick prototype 3, Staff of Merlin model 14 –

What?

Moving further in, Harry saw charts spread over tables, and books lying open – something in runic script, and Squibs and Muggleborns: A Comprehensive Analysis, and who knew what else.

The pounding on the door commenced about when Harry noticed a whole stack of what seemed to be altars with runes and skulls on them.

He stumbled to another door, which opened into a narrow and dark little corridor – another extension of that storage space, except that things on the shelves here seemed broken.

A door loomed at the end of the corridor. Harry attempted to run towards it, but his injuries refused to go ignored any longer. His recently wounded leg gave out under him, and the shoulder sent a spike of pain down his left arm.

His world suddenly constricted to a series of bright flashes of pain, Harry didn't realise that his pursuer had already caught up with him until he felt the Expelliarmus hit him.

Then, it was already too late by half.

Harry shook his head to clear it and saw a huge hulking Death Eater standing in his way and smiling in a way that was both menacing and unfathomably idiotic at once.

Crabbe Sr., Harry identified. Or Goyle. It didn't matter, really.

What mattered was that Crabbe, or Goyle, was lumbering towards Harry, having pocketed both wands and clearly planning to take Harry out with bare hands.

Harry lunged aside.

He crashed into the shelves with his right, thankfully uninjured, shoulder, but then Goyle – or Crabbe – was already aiming with his fist again.



"Don't move," he warned. "I'm not here to kill you. Just sit still."

Harry ducked when he saw the huge fist coming at him, and the man hit the glass panel on one of the shelves. Shards and wooden planks rained on Harry, and he shielded his head with his arms, but it was all worth it as Crabbe-or-Goyle gave a roar of pain.

"You little bastard," he growled, and swung again.

This was not going well – wandless, Harry couldn't pretend to do much – but then he saw what was lying on the floor next to him.

Wands. Several wands lay there. They must have fallen from the shelves – some were broken, but some looked all right. Harry wasn't going to be picky.

"Segrego!" he cast rapidly, aiming with the first wand he'd grabbed.

The effect, he couldn't have predicted. Instead of the man's arm coming dislocated, huge gashes exploded over the front of his robes. The man gave a terrified scream and wobbled on his feet –

For a moment, his wide eyes locked with Harry's. Then, he slowly fell forward, toppling right over Harry and the shelf.

Harry slid completely to the floor under the weight of his assailant, feeling the man's warm blood seep through his robes. Nauseated and slightly panicked at the idea of staying pinned by that weight forever, Harry squirmed frantically away. Thankfully, the man seemed to have passed out from the pain, so at least he wasn't groaning anymore.

It took Harry a while to free himself, and it had torn at his wounds and left him breathless – but at least he was reasonably safe now, and again in the possession of his wand, which he'd fished out of Crabbe's – or Goyle's – pocket.

The gash in his leg was bleeding profusely, and the arm was actually starting to go a little numb. In addition to that, Harry was feeling distinctly dizzy and just –

Just not okay.

He tried to calm down and tell himself that it was okay to not feel okay, considering.

It wasn't working.

He looked at Goyle. Or Crabbe. Or whoever the fuck it was lying a hand's reach away, looking – dead.

Harry looked around, hoping to somehow find out what to do. Did he want this Crabbe or Goyle to be dead? He didn't know. He hadn't set out to kill anyone, he –

He was beginning to feel claustrophobic, alone with a body, out cold, in this narrow little corridor. No sounds infiltrated it, so he felt completely cut off from the world here.

Winching, Harry got up and limped, as fast as he could, towards the door at the end of the corridor, trying not to think so much of Crabbe-or-Goyle and the blood still wet on his robes.

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Opening the door, he found that he was in luck for once.

Black floor, black ceiling, blue torches. Doors everywhere. The circular room, again – and a Death Eater standing guard.

Harry's wand was aimed at that person's back and firing a quiet Stunner before they even had the time to react.

Harry stood on the threshold, looking over his options. Kingsley lay injured – hopefully injured, not dead – in the room with the missing door. One of the other doors led to the room where the duel between Voldemort and Dumbledore was happening. A third one led to the elevators. The other eight led god only knew where.

The first door Harry tried didn't even open. The second led to an odd amphitheatre-like chamber with an archway at the bottom. The third revealed another place with rows of shelves – although this one looked like significant fighting had happened here.

Harry could hardly believe it when he finally saw the black floors and black ceiling of the corridor leading out of the Department of Mysteries.

Finally.

The Atrium had never been nearer, or hope sweeter.

Harry stumbled through the corridor. Soon, he'd get to the hall where the elevator was. Just a few steps more –

Which was when Harry saw Lucius Malfoy stationed by the elevator.

"Going somewhere, Potter?" Malfoy asked, wand held with deceptive carelessness in his fingers.

He surveyed Harry's appearance haughtily – and Harry could only imagine what he looked like, covered in blood and dust and looking like he'd been through a grinder.

"I was, but then you're in my way," Harry said, desperation mounting.

He was in no state to fight Lucius Malfoy right now. He really, really wasn't.

"If only the world were to see their hero now," Malfoy said. "You don't cut much of a figure, Potter, if you don't mind me saying."

"Now, Lucius, this is quite enough," a very familiar voice said from behind Harry, and Harry froze in horror.

It just couldn't be true. It couldn't.

Harry turned around, wand raised, already knowing that it could.

And it was.

Voldemort was standing just a few feet away, between Harry and the door back to the Department of Mysteries. A mocking smile played on his lips as he observed Harry.

"If you go on, Lucius, you will completely crush his fragile teenage ego," Voldemort continued – but his eyes were for Harry alone. "We'd want our opponent to have at least a little fighting spirit when we start on him, would we not?"

Lucius had some way of alerting Voldemort, Harry recalled dully. That had been the whole point of his visit to Hogwarts.

Funny how such details tended to fall by the wayside when one saw heads being ripped off of people and blood gushing in streams and death and –

Harry wondered whether the same end awaited him.

"Hard to believe, is it not, that this pathetic boy is destined to be my deathly foe," Voldemort said. "I am almost insulted."

Why almost, Harry wondered, and realised with a start that he'd spoken aloud when Voldemort replied:

"Ah, because you do hold a small measure of interest, Harry Potter." His crimson eyes flashed. "All these coincidences, your curious survival – twice already... No matter, no matter. It all ends tonight."

"Are you sure you even dare try another Killing Curse at me?" Harry's mouth said, quite independently of him. "Didn't work for you the first two times. Seeing as I'm still alive, anyway."

"Not for much longer," Voldemort announced menacingly, taking a step forward. "Avada Kedavra!"

Harry stumbled to the side.

There was absolutely no cover – and nowhere to run, either. With nothing to lose, Harry cast a Killing Curse in return.

Voldemort stepped out of its way and sent another Killing Curse at Harry.

Harry ducked, so the curse ricocheted off the gleaming black wall and reflected towards the elevator where Lucius Malfoy was standing.

Malfoy quickly dodged it.

Harry could hardly hear anything over the pounding of blood in his ears, but he saw people emerging from the staircase near the elevator.

He thought he recognised the man leading the crowd, but then that man stepped right into the way of the stray Killing Curse.

He was gaping and wide-eyed as he collapsed, motionless, onto the floor.

Voldemort was already casting another Killing Curse, and so was Harry –

Harry supposed there might have been screams, but he didn't notice, because the two Killing Curses collided in mid-air right then.

They latched onto each other, connecting Harry and Voldemort's wands in a stream of deep gold colour instead of Killing Curse-green. Harry found he couldn't let go of the wand; it was shaking horribly in his hand, so he latched onto it with both, eyes wide, unsure what to do.

Beams of light splintered off the golden connection, forming a golden dome over Harry and Voldemort.

What on earth –

Voldemort, to Harry's relief, didn't look like he knew what was happening either. In fact, he looked – unsettled? Scared, even?

This steadied Harry's resolve; he focused on the golden stream. All had seemed lost just a few moments ago, but now – what did he have to do, how could he use this, what was this?

Harry felt Voldemort trying to break the connection, and concentrated on not letting him, because what Voldemort wanted was surely bad for Harry, and if Voldemort was suffering, so much the better –

Harry's breath came in short gasps. Sweat drops ran down his neck and into his robe. He closed his eyes momentarily.

He couldn't keep holding this forever, either. There had to be something –

He had to get control of Voldemort's wand –

Voldemort's wand.

An idea, ever so clear, entered Harry's head, and it seemed so simple and logical he wasn't sure what he'd been confused about.

Expelliarmus, he whispered, gazing intently into the connection.

His wand gave a huge lurch in his hands, and a shock went through it, and then through Harry, and then the connection hummed and shivered and grew an angry red and Harry's vision was suddenly going red too and he was no longer sure it had been such a clever idea –

Suddenly, he wasn't standing in his place anymore. Instead, he saw an ashen-faced Harry Potter standing opposite him, holding a wildly shaking wand with both hands, and he was angry, he was the greatest wizard of his time, he had immense power at his command, and yet this brat was creating this somehow, attacking him, inside his mind –

Harry slammed into himself, and his eyes were watering, and he could hardly think or stand or be anymore.

There was a flash of white-hot pain, a deluge of scalding fire, and then a force knocked into Harry, sending him away, flying – flying –

Flying –

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Harry saw Dumbledore's beard hanging over him at an odd angle, and then there was pain assaulting every inch of his body before he knew why, and then there was the Order and Ministry workers and mediwizards.

And noise. Lots of noise, and cameras flashing, and why couldn't they all just shut up?

"You mean to say – that this was Harry?" someone was asking from beyond the mediwizards. "The entire night?"

"Who else but Harry Potter could have repelled You-Know-Who?"

"Yes, but – the duels and the spells and the – "

"It was supposed to be Tonks!"

"With all respect to her, that bit at the end, as Dedalus says – "

"But how did he survive, he's a fifteen-year-old kid for Merlin's sake – "

"But I saw him cast – "

"How did he – "

"Nonverbal spells, how does he – "

Harry winced as the bones in his leg moved, directed by a mediwizard's wand, and then connected together with crack. His head throbbed something awful, and his entire left arm felt like it would fall off and he wouldn't miss it for all the pain it was causing, and his leg, shit –

Images of tonight's fight flashed before his mind's eye, replacing each other with nauseating speed, almost supplanting reality.

Voldemort. Dawlish's severed head. Blood all over Crabbe, and Kingsley dying on the floor. Voldemort, and a strange connection, and a fire.

A fire?

He was so tired.

"I want to see my godson!" a voice shouted suddenly over the ruckus. "Take me where you like, but I want to see my godson first!"

Squinting through the haze that surrounded him, Harry focused on the source of the noise – and, sure enough, Sirius Black's ragged and bloodied face emerged from the crowd. The man was held at the arms by some Ministry personnel, who looked no less wild than he did.

"Harry!" Black exclaimed, barging through and dragging the officials with him. "You're fine, thank everything – "

"Mr. Black, you are being held on the charges of – "

"I don't care, let me – "

"I'm fine, Sirius," Harry said, his voice emerging as a pitiful rasp. "Really. Are you – what is – "

"Excuse me, gentlemen," Dumbledore said, appearing somehow right between Harry and Black. "I believe we must resolve this misunderstanding."

Harry closed his eyes; his eyelids were getting much too heavy. He wondered dimly whether Black was going straight back to Azkaban. He found himself hoping it wasn't the case.



"Drink this, Mr. Potter," a mediwizard told Harry, pressing a glass vial to his lips.

It felt like only a wink passed between the horrid taste of the potion hitting Harry's senses and Harry waking up in a hospital bed at the Hogwarts Infirmary. However, Madam Pomfrey was already running her scans on him and saying that he'd slept over 48 hours.

Harry blinked disorientedly.

Last he'd seen and heard and felt was – pain, noise, blood. Now, still and sterile surroundings.

"Your nervous system dearly needed the rest," Madam Pomfrey told him. "The damage you sustained is impossible to describe, for it is beyond the scope of current medical research."

"I'm fine now, though, aren't I?" Harry asked, turning his head this way and that and rolling his shoulder.

No trace of the remembered pain, but he did still feel sluggish and tired.

"You are healed for the moment, Mr. Potter, but there's no saying what long-term consequences might come of this. Do abstain from doing anything dangerous in the upcoming weeks," Madam Pomfrey ordered.

"I understand," Harry said.

"I hope so," Madam Pomfrey said severely. "Because you have already survived the impact of the Killing Curse twice, and whatever happened at the Ministry put your nervous system through further strain still. We cannot know how much more you can take, because by all rights, you should already be – "

Dead, Harry finished inwardly and looked away from Madam Pomfrey's guilty face. She clearly hadn't intended to put it like that, but it was the truth, and that was fine.

"Your friends came to see you," the matron said after a pause. "And the Headmaster requested to talk to you once you are awake. While I would not yet advise you to leave the Hospital Wing, I can alert him if you wish."

"Thank you," Harry said. "That would be nice."

Nice wasn't the word for it, exactly, but Dumbledore could potentially shed light on what had happened at the Ministry and thereafter.

Harry had questions. Many of them.

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"Harry," Dumbledore began cheerfully, once Madam Pomfrey left them alone. Then his face fell. "Harry. I'm glad to see you so well recovered, but I also know that I have failed you, and I only hope that you will find it in your heart to forgive me."

Harry looked away from Dumbledore and out the window at the sunny afternoon.

It had not yet occurred to him, in the rush of events, to be angry at Dumbledore for anything, but now he realised that he might perhaps have cause to. Dumbledore had promised to protect him at the Ministry, but the night ended with Harry standing alone against Voldemort. However, Harry was feeling more resigned than angry about that, besides which –

"Voldemort was exposed, wasn't he," Harry said and was surprised by how detached he sounded. "I remember there were Ministry people there. The mission was successful."

"Yes," Dumbledore answered carefully. "The Ministry has now acknowledged Voldemort's return."

"And this success wouldn't have been possible without my participation," Harry continued. "Because if I had not come along the mission would not have gone ahead."

"Yes, your participation had been invaluable," Dumbledore agreed.

"And if I had left earlier in the evening by Portkey, I would not have delayed Voldemort, and no connection would have trapped him at the Ministry to be seen by people," Harry said.

"Yes, indeed," Dumbledore replied, and he was frowning now.

Harry could then ask the next final question that would reveal what he'd been driving at. He could ask, childishly, what Dumbledore's apology meant in that case – knowing the outcome, did Dumbledore truly regret the way it had happened?

However, Harry knew already the answer, without asking.

They'd had this conversation before.

("I regret asking so much from you."

"But you ask anyway.")

This apology wasn't about Dumbledore's failure to protect him, Harry was sure. It was about not regretting the turn of events, whatever they had cost Harry, because they'd been beneficial for the cause in the end.

It was perhaps a mark of the tiredness that Harry still felt – not just physical, but some exhaustion that seemed soul-deep – that he could not summon up any indignation.

"What happened at the Ministry?" he asked, abruptly changing the subject. "And what has been happening since then?"

Dumbledore observed Harry in silence a little before answering, as if he were contemplating a return to the previous topic. In the end, he wisely decided to let the sleeping dogs lie.

"I believe you will find the wizarding Britain a much changed place upon your awakening," he said. "The political changes that have

occurred are significant. You might remember, of course, that Cornelius Fudge fell victim to one of the stray curses that night."

Harry started. He hadn't remembered, but now he could see it clearly in his mind's eye – the official that strayed into the path of Voldemort's Killing Curse, his shocked face, his wide-open eyes. Harry had been in shock and hadn't recognised him then, but it was obvious in retrospect.

"So he's dead," Harry said.

"Yes," Dumbledore confirmed, looking at Harry closely again. Perhaps discomfited by the lack of emotion in Harry's voice. "As such, he is quite naturally no longer Minister. An emergency election is being held next week."

"What's the Ministry been doing?"

"Alerting the world to Voldemort's return," Dumbledore said. "Arranging for national security and reshuffling the ranks along with their ideas."

Harry was about to ask what that meant, exactly, but then figured he'd be better off finding out from his friends. They'd tell him all kinds of colourful Ministry gossip, he was sure.

"What's Voldemort been doing?" he asked. "Or, actually, what happened at the Ministry – did they arrest any Death Eaters, did the Order get into trouble, or Sirius Black, are – how about Kingsley?"

"Kingsley had not survived his first night at the hospital," Dumbledore pronounced solemnly. "His wounds had been far too grave. His loss is a blow to us all."

Harry thought back to the fight with Dolohov. He remembered Dolohov's smug smile and wanted to wipe it off his face. He recalled Kingsley's worried air and wondered whether there was anything he could have done better. Whether he should have just shut up and followed Kingsley's instruction from the start; whether he could have protected Kingsley somehow, even though the very thought was

ridiculous. Dolohov was much too strong for Harry to deal with, that had been abundantly clear.

He wished he hadn't been Kingsley's last assignment.

"Hestia Jones is at St. Mungo's," Dumbledore continued. "She's getting expert help, although she will suffer some effects for the rest of her life. Sirius is still in Ministry custody in a holding cell, but I have managed to convince them not to send him to Azkaban. Many others have sustained wounds, but thankfully they have not all needed hospitalisation."

"What about that Unspeakable, Croaker?" Harry asked.

He was unable to recall what happened to the man.

Dumbledore smiled.

"Mr. Croaker secluded himself away from the fight very early on and activated the available alarms," he said. "A very rational man, Mr. Croaker."

Harry could just imagine.

"Auror Dawlish, on the other hand, has suffered a gruesome fate," Dumbledore said, and Harry couldn't help his grimace at the memory. "The poor man had been placed under Imperius and made a puppet in the Death Eaters' hands, but his last stand had been admirable. Alas..." Dumbledore sighed. "Azkaban, meanwhile, has acquired new additions – several Death Eaters were indeed arrested, among them one Lucius Malfoy."

Harry nodded.

"Who else?"

"A Jugson, and McNair, and several others. Unfortunately, some rather prominent Death Eaters slipped through – Bellatrix Lestrange and Antonin Dolohov among them. Alastor Moody claims that the

young Barty Crouch was quite permanently indisposed by the end of their duel, but his body has not been found."

"How about – Crabbe, or Goyle?"

"Of Mr. Crabbe I know nothing, but I believe that Donatus Goyle had been found dead in a small corridor close to one of the big rooms," Dumbledore said and gave Harry a piercing look.

"Oh," Harry said, feeling cold.

Donatus. He hadn't known the man's name was Donatus. He hadn't been entirely sure he'd killed the man, either.

This was war. Of course he'd have to kill someone. Eventually.

The exhaustion he felt only intensified with that thought.

Did it maybe get easier?

He wasn't sure he wanted it to get easier. It was already so easy – to kill someone. You might not even know you'd done it, and there it was.

Like magic.

And Voldemort would kill Harry, if Harry didn't kill him.

"What was it, when our wands connected?" Harry asked, shaking his head to dispel the images. "Mine and Voldemort's, I mean, at the Ministry. There was this golden beam – "

"Ah yes," Dumbledore said. "A most curious occurrence."

Harry waited.

"You see, Harry, I am not sure that you are aware of this, but your wand and Voldemort's are brothers," Dumbledore said. "The cores of both your wands are phoenix feathers from the same phoenix. Fawkes, as it happens."

"And this sort of thing happens every time brother wands try to fight each other?"

Dumbledore sighed.

"What you must take into account, Harry, is that yours and Voldemort's situations are completely unique. Yes, brother wands generally produce unexpected effects when fighting each other. However, the wand also chooses its master, and the masters of these brother wands happened to be so intricately linked..."

Harry reflected that he was getting kind of sick of every strange occurrence around him – of which there were many – being explained away as a side-effect of his and Voldemort's connection. It was as if everything about him was defined by their link.

"I understand," Harry said. "But what was it? There was this moment when I – I was like in his head, or something, and then there was this explosion, and I just don't understand that."

Dumbledore slowly glanced around the empty ward, then back at Harry.

"I believe that you might have somehow been a catalyst for that," he said. "I am not entirely certain how, but you seemed to have sent an unexpected burst of power in Voldemort's direction, which took him by surprise and shattered his defences for a few moments – an unprecedented feat, I assure you. Due to the highly charged magics coursing through and around you, you have somehow managed to perform unintended Legilimency on Voldemort, which he quickly recognised and purged you from his mind. The explosion – I suppose – was the result of these bursts of power in an already extremely charged environment."

Harry thought on this. It all made sense, except for one thing.

"I have performed unintended – what?"

Dumbledore sighed.

"Legilimency," he said. "Which is a much longer conversation, and I am not sure we should have it at this stage in the proceedings."

"I would really rather know," Harry insisted. "It was as if I'd ended up inside his head."

"You did," Dumbledore allowed. "Unintentionally, of course. Intentionally, it takes great skill and practice, especially since Voldemort himself is a great Legilimens."

"A person who can look into people's minds?" Harry asked, with stirrings of horror.

"Yes," Dumbledore said.

He still looked uncertain that they should be discussing this. Harry was growing more certain by the second.

"There are people who can read minds in the wizarding world?"

"Not read, per se," Dumbledore corrected. "Your initial assessment had been correct. Look into people's minds, to see their memories and sense their feelings."

"And Voldemort is one of those people," Harry said.

"Indeed."

"With all due respect, Headmaster, you are only telling me this now?"

Harry abruptly felt like leaving the wizarding world, or drowning himself in the lake. He'd lived here for so long, and he hadn't known... What else didn't he know? Who of his classmates could read minds also, who of people around him, what other fundamentally life-changing magics was he not aware of?

"While a highly skilled Legilimens, Voldemort has not yet acquired the ability to penetrate minds over distance," Dumbledore said calmly.



"Since you do not spend extended periods of time in his presence, I felt that this ability posed no particular danger to you."

"And when I do meet him, I can just assume that he can read my every thought!" Harry said, thinking back to the things he had thought in Voldemort's presence before.

It was intensely humiliating, because most those times, he'd been scared shitless.

"Is there a way to defend against this?" Harry demanded. "There must be, you said he threw me out of his mind – how?"

"There is a technique known as Occlumency," Dumbledore said. "Using it, you can shield your mind against intrusion. However, it is extremely difficult, and not widely practiced. Also, hardly any people find it worthwhile, considering how few Legilimency practitioners there are."

"Who can do it of people that I know?" Harry asked and then felt like hitting himself. "Of course. You can, Headmaster, can't you?"

Which ranked right second after Voldemort being a mind-reader, because, while not his sworn enemy, Dumbledore was still not a person Harry wanted to share his every thought with. To think that Dumbledore might have been reading his mind all this time –

"Indeed I can, but I assure you that I never abuse this skill," Dumbledore said.

"Who else can do this – Legilimacy thing?"

"Legilimency," Dumbledore corrected. "Not many Order members at all. Alastor knows the basics, but he is much better at Occlumency. Which is, as I'm sure you realise, part of the reason why I never saw through young Barty Crouch's disguise in your fourth year," Dumbledore added. "For he is evidently a practitioner as well, although I would not be surprised if he were capable of Legilimency also."

"Who else?" Harry insisted, frowning.

"Remus possesses some natural Occlumency skills, that come from his lycanthropic affliction, but he is no Legilimens. Sirius had been exposed to both arts in his childhood, I believe – they are obscure and today practiced, for the most part, in very old Pureblood families, like the Blacks. Sirius does not have the personality for mastering Occlumency or Legilimency, however."

While Dumbledore talked, Harry had been thinking. It soon dawned on him what he should have seen at once.

"Professor Snape," he said, with a growing feeling of doom. "He must know this, mustn't he, if he's a spy?"

The world was officially ending: Harry's horrible Head of House had been reading his mind since first year.

"Professor Snape does indeed practice both of these arts, as they are essential in his line of work," Dumbledore confirmed. "Like me, however, he exercises utmost discretion when it comes to students, or indeed any social interactions."

"Right," Harry said. "Headmaster, I'm quite sure that I need to learn this O – "

"Occlumency."

" – that, as soon as possible."

"Please believe me when I say that neither myself, nor Professor Snape are in the habit of infringing upon your privacy, Harry," Dumbledore said.

He looked upset by this idea, but surely he couldn't expect Harry to live in the world where people could read minds without having defended his own?

"It's not that," Harry said. Or not entirely that. "It's just that – if I know that some enemy might read my mind, then I'd want to prevent that

from happening. What if Voldemort finds out something from me, or – you said that Barty Crouch could do this too – it doesn't matter how rare mind-reading is, it's still dangerous."

"In the Order, there are only two people who could teach you, Harry – Professor Snape and myself," Dumbledore said. "If you do seriously wish to learn, I can try to arrange some tutoring for next year. Right now, it is not entirely possible, what with the Ministry upheaval and the Defence position being open again."

"The Defence position?" Harry repeated, deciding not to focus for now on the nightmare that would be opening his mind up to Snape or Dumbledore voluntarily. "Isn't Professor Umbridge – "

Dumbledore looked suddenly grim.

"Professor Umbridge has not yet recovered from the intense psychological ordeal she'd undergone on the day of our Ministry visit. While the official story declares that she had suffered a nervous breakdown, there are witnesses who claim they saw the Weasley twins manhandling her in the Hogwarts corridors that same day."

"That's not possible," Harry said.

It wasn't. He'd specifically agreed with the Weasley twins that they'd stay the fuck away from Umbridge that entire day. They were certainly not to manhandle her anywhere.

"And yet the witnesses claim it is true," Dumbledore said. "An official investigation into this matter might be launched any day now, depending on the Ministry situation. It is extremely unstable at the moment."

Harry needed to talk to the twins as soon as possible, then.

"So what is happening to the Defence position?" he asked, just to fill the silence.

"I plan to invite Emmeline Vance to serve as your Defence instructor for the remainder of the year," Dumbledore said. "She has not yet

agreed – and she has declined on a previous occasion when I suggested it, for she did not want to be seen openly associating with me. In those troubled times, it was important for her role in the Order to maintain a seemingly aloof stand and remain in good graces of the Pureblood faction. Now, however, our fortunes are changing, and I am persona non grata in the Ministry no more. I believe she might agree."

This was all too much information for Harry's already overloaded brain. However, he wasn't calling an end to this conference without asking a final desperate question. He wasn't even sure he expected an honest answer, but he had to try.

"Headmaster," Harry said. "Today, I found out about people in the wizarding world who can read minds. I would have really appreciated knowing about this before. Is there anything – anything else, anything relevant to the war, to my position in it, to me potentially fighting Voldemort – that I still need to, or might need to, know?"

A rather lengthy silence followed this question, but Harry was determined to wait it out. Then, Dumbledore gave a sigh.

"Yes, Harry," he said. "Yes, in all truth, there is yet something very important that you should be made aware of. I had not confided in you before, mainly because I had not been sure how you would handle this knowledge and the task ahead. However, in the light of your recent adventure at the Ministry, it would be most unseemly of me to deny you this information, for you have proven yourself again and again."

Harry's heart sank. Dumbledore sounded really, really serious, and whatever this unknown thing was, it wasn't going to be good news.

"However," Dumbledore continued emphatically, "it would be equally selfish of me to impart this knowledge when you have just woken up from a traumatic experience and have had to face a lot of other information besides. I will let you rest for now. I swear to you that I will tell you everything when you feel that you are ready. You may come to my office at any later point you wish and I will either tell you then if I'm not otherwise engaged, or I'll arrange a suitable time with you."

Harry's initial desire was to protest – if there was important stuff to be known, he wanted to hear it now. On the other hand, it was true that his head was already hurting from all the talking and thinking, and he was growing exponentially more tired.

So many things to process. Perhaps he'd leave any remaining apocalyptic revelations till later.

"Thank you for telling me all this," he said.

Dumbledore gave another sigh.

"I fear that you are right, Harry, in that you really do need to know. You are, of course, much too young, but I cannot be pushing you towards battle with one hand and concealing knowledge in the other behind my back. The night at the Ministry has shown to me with great clarity that we, the adults, have failed you."

Harry frowned uncomprehendingly. Dumbledore gave him a sad smile.

"Do not mistake me, Harry. I am proud of our achievements. I was very impressed that you could defend yourself so well, and your duelling skills are beyond what we, in the Order – or even as your teachers – could have imagined."

Despite feeling that Dumbledore was not going to continue in this congratulatory manner, Harry allowed himself a moment of satisfaction.

"However, I wish that you had not needed to go to these lengths," Dumbledore said, his voice solemn. "I wish, although it is too late, that you had not known half those spells, and not seen half of what you had seen. I wish that your soul had remained as bright and pure as it had been when you defeated an ancient Basilisk with a sword and a phoenix song – but I cannot fault you for straying from the clear path, because we had not seen it happen, and we should have. By Merlin, we should have..."

Harry wasn't sure he liked that view of him – that he was some lost soul in need of salvation. He knew this related to the same feeling that Dumbledore expressed when Fawkes refused to carry Harry out of the Ministry, and he'd much rather be asked what have you done than what has been done to you.

"Headmaster, I'm not – "

"Please, Harry, " Dumbledore said, holding up a hand. "I am afraid that I will call in a privilege of old age and say that you must live to my years to understand fully what I say, even though I know it is annoying for you to hear. Let me just say that I have seen, heard, or could guess at some of the things that you have done at the Ministry." Dumbledore made a meaningful pause. "And I am glad to have seen in you today that, whatever you've had to do, it has not come to you easily. I rejoice in the thought that you might perhaps draw some valuable lessons from this and grow into the person that I know you are meant to be."

Harry didn't know what kind of person he was meant to be. He just wanted to go to sleep and forget that he was the kind of person who was meant to defeat Voldemort.

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Harry gazed at the ripples on the lake as he walked along the shore. The day was chilly and windy, so Hogwarts grounds were mostly free of roaming students, which was good; Harry didn't want to see people. He wanted to think.

It had only been three days since the battle at the Ministry, two of which Harry had spent unconscious. To him, it felt that these three days had lasted a whole lifetime, during which he'd fought in a long and difficult war, the outcome of which was unclear because the losses were still being counted.

The wizarding press trumpeted Harry as the victor in the most significant duel of the decade.

The Boy-Who-Lived saves us all – again! The headlines proclaimed. Or: Boy-Who-Lived not at St. Mungo's, sources say. Or then, Witness accounts of the Ministry duel: "Magic the likes of which I'd never seen".

The word of Harry's duel with Voldemort had spread, as well as the wild rumours of its outcome. By all reports, Harry had performed some hereto unseen, incredible magic, and the last feat of this magnitude had been achieved by Harry himself, when he'd thwarted Voldemort as a baby. This combination of facts somehow inevitably led people to believe that Harry was the answer to all questions being asked now that the Ministry had openly acknowledged Voldemort's return.

There would be war, no doubt about that. Open warfare hadn't yet begun, but people were already terrified. Already looking for a saviour.

Harry recognised that his fortunes had changed drastically for the better. He knew that he could use the public's desire to see him as their hero and planned to milk the adoration for all it was worth – especially since it was most likely temporary. In a coldly logical, calculating manner, he was pleased at the turn of events.

Jubilant he was not, and it had not occurred to him that he could be, about any of this, until he met with his friends on the day of his release from the hospital.

They seemed excited.

("Don't do things by half-measures, do you? It was only the greatest battle of the last decade that you got involved in.")

They were relieved.

("I ask you to be careful, and you go fight You-Know-Who? Don't you ever again – we didn't know how you were for days!")

They approved.

("Good job, Harry, we knew you had it in you.")

Neville had beamed at Harry, Cedric had ruffled his hair, Anthony had shaken his hand, and Millie had punched his arm. They had all seemed inordinately pleased to see him and cheerful about life.

This threw Harry for a loop, because it hadn't occurred to him to be happy about the battle.

He'd thought about it, during the long night he'd been forced to spend at the Hospital Wing. He'd thought about his reasons for going and about the results achieved. He'd wondered whether his reasons would have still stood, even if he'd known what the battle would be like. He'd compared what he'd expected from the battle to the reality of it. He hadn't known what he'd be facing, despite the duels he'd participated in before.

He'd never before truly seen the curses he'd casually studied put to proper use. It was one thing to read and memorise the wand movements and the incantation for the Entrails-Expelling Curse. It was another thing entirely to see it done, and understand the kind of magic you had been casting.

He'd never before seen Aurors and Death Eaters or Voldemort and Dumbledore engaged in a serious fight. It gave Harry a measure of his own powers, as well as put them into perspective. He could hold his own in a fight with adults, but knowing that he had to defeat Voldemort – he wasn't sure he'd ever measure up.

He'd also never killed anyone before.

Looking at the happy and smiling faces of his friends, Harry had realised with a jolt of something that was a little like wistfulness and a lot like despair that none of them still ever had done any of that, and that Harry didn't feel like explaining any of it.

At all.

He'd have to, though, Harry acknowledged as he looked at the lake. There were only that many things he could withhold from his friends before he became disconnected from them completely. They might



not be able to understand everything – and, Harry thought ruefully, he wasn't going to tell them everything – but they had to be told some things.

The prophecy, for instance.

Harry closed his eyes against the sun, still for the moment.

It was safe to tell them the prophecy now that Voldemort knew its contents, and they did need to know. Neville knew already, of course, but Neville was different. Neville could have been in Harry's shoes now and Harry in Neville's, if fate – or chance – had not willed otherwise.

Fate...

Harry shivered as a gust of wind blew over him.

He wondered what Voldemort was doing.

CHP15